





LEAN BROWN MEN



*NOVELS BY MICHAEL BURT*

SECRET ORCHARDS

THE ROAD TO ROUNDABOUT

HILL QUEST

(WARD, LOCK & CO., LTD.)

CATCH-EM-ALIVE-O !

(W. & R. CHAMBERS, LTD.)

# LEAN BROWN MEN

BY  
MICHAEL BURT

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
FIELD-MARSHAL THE LORD BIRDWOOD  
G.C.B., G.C.S.I., G.C.M.G., G.C.V.O., C.I.E., D.S.O., D.C.L., I.L.D.  
FORMERLY COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF IN INDIA

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED  
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

Durga Sah Memorial Library,	
Bhujangpore, Bangalore	
Class No. 1731	
Book No. 1731	
Received from Mr. H. ...	

*First published in 1940*

IN MEMORY OF  
MAIZAR

10TH JUNE 1897



## *Contents*

	PAGE
FOREWORD BY FIELD-MARSHAL THE LORD BIRDWOOD	9
<i>BOOK I</i>	
MOONRISE AT FORT MARJORIE . . . . .	15
<i>BOOK II</i>	
MUBARIKII DAY . . . . .	115
<i>BOOK III</i>	
ADRIAN'S DREAM . . . . .	175
<i>BOOK IV</i>	
THE BENT BANANA . . . . .	207
<i>BOOK V</i>	
"BUMPII" . . . . .	259



## FOREWORD

IN 1846 was fought the battle of Sobraon, resulting in the complete overthrow and dispersion of the Sikh army and the prostration of the Punjab at the feet of the British Government.

It was for the maintenance of order in the newly annexed territories, and especially for the defence of our ever-advancing frontiers to the North and West of India, that the famous Punjab Frontier Force (or, as it was originally named, the Punjab Irregular Force) came into being. It is of incidental interest to note that the Punjab Irregular Force was raised mainly by the simple expedient of transferring personnel, or in some cases whole units, from the Khalsa Army of the late Maharaja Ranjit Singh to the British colours: an association which was commemorated by the adoption by four of the P.I.F. infantry regiments—those known as the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Sikhs—of four of the colours from the “*pānj rānga*” of the Sikh Durbar flag, as regimental facings.

The subsequent history of the North-West Frontier has ever been largely that of the “Piffers,” as the P.I.F. and the P.F.F. soon came to be nicknamed. True, the Punjab



## *Foreword*

Frontier Force ceased to exist as a separate entity as long ago as 1903, when the exigencies of our Frontier policy made it necessary that the burden of policing the 400 miles of borderland should be shared equally by the whole of the Indian Army instead of continuing to be entrusted almost entirely to the Force of specialists who had hitherto borne it with such gallant distinction. But the grand old Piffer units still live on, under new and sometimes unfamiliar titles, to perpetuate and even to enhance the splendid traditions of their illustrious forebears. To-day, as yesterday, there are always Piffer regiments to be found on the Frontier, with Kohat and its little church and Frontier Force Mess as a rallying centre for all good Piffers ; and one or more of these units will be almost certain to figure prominently in the "Order of Battle" of any campaign that may be afoot.

It was my own good fortune to know the Frontier in the days when the Punjab Frontier Force still flourished as a self-contained force of all arms—horse, foot and guns—some 15,000 strong, and deeply learned in the most exacting arts of frontier warfare. In my long years of Indian service I have soldiered and campaigned in almost every corner of that wild borderland : from the Kam Takka Pass in the Mohmand country to Gilgit in the far north ; through all the great passes—Khyber, Kurrani, Tochi, Zhob—right down to Chaman in Baluchistan. I have known and admired countless Pathan

## *Foreword*

tribesmen both as friends and as foes, and I can still claim real friendship with many of the tribal chiefs. And it has been one of the proudest privileges of my later years to hold the appointment of Colonel-Commandant of that truly magnificent corps, the 13th Frontier Force Rifles, in every battalion of which—(and each modern battalion is a direct descendant of one of the great Piffer regiments of earlier days)—so many brave tribesmen from both sides of the border give loyal service to the King-Emperor.

To those who know the Frontier and its stirring history it must always be a source of wonder that it has not begotten a nobler and worthier literature. It is true that the records and regimental histories of the old Piffer units are veritable storehouses of gallant tales: of valiant deeds and subtle stratagems, of black treacheries and fearless feats of arms; but the Piffers have never sought to publicize their exploits, and in any case their stories are set down with such dry official reticence and modesty as to intrigue and exasperate rather than to satisfy. One day—and why not in time for the Piffer centenary in 1946?—the history of the Punjab Frontier Force as a whole should be written by a man both qualified and inspired to breathe fresh life into the dry bones of the official records. He would have an incomparable theme, and it is a work that cries aloud to be done.

But even in the realm of fiction it is strange

## Foreword

that a land which has been the scene of so much that is worthy of record should have inspired, on the whole, novels and stories often of such indifferent quality. With a few notable exceptions, tales of the North-West Frontier have failed utterly to convey to the reader any clear and reliable picture of the country itself, of the Pathan tribesmen who inhabit it, of the conditions under which our troops have for nearly a century lived and fought there. The typical Frontier novel substitutes a false glamour, an exaggerated sensationalism, a sometimes ludicrous sense of melodrama, for the realities of the life and the authentic atmosphere of the border ; and consequently the fiction of the Frontier has fallen somewhat into disrepute. One obvious reason for these shortcomings is that so many of such stories have been invented by men and women—and especially women—who have either never been on the Frontier at all, or who wrongly imagine that a cold-weather spent in Peshawar qualifies them to write of matters that can only be known to those who have themselves experienced the rigours, responsibilities and difficulties of Frontier life under active service conditions. And, as a general rule, the men who *are* qualified by experience to write of these things are less handy with the Pen than with the Sword.

The present volume, which I have the pleasure of introducing to the public, will, I venture to think, do much to correct the unfortunate influences exercised by so many of its predecessors,

## *Foreword*

for it is the work of a man who, in learning to wield his sword, learnt also to use a pen. I first met Michael Burt nearly twenty years ago at Kohat, where he was then serving as a company officer with that very distinguished Piffer regiment, the 51st Prince of Wales' Own Sikhs (Frontier Force)—the old 1st Sikhs of the original P.F.F., and now the 1st Battalion of the 12th Frontier Force Regiment. In those days our author had not yet discovered that he could write ; but, though still a very young man, he had already begun to accumulate the many and varied experiences of Frontier life which stand him in such good stead to-day. Already he had seen active service in the Third Afghan War and in the Mahsud Campaign ; had commanded little lonely forts in the Gomal Valley, and come to grips with the Mahsud tribesmen during the fierce fighting encountered by General Sir Andrew Skene's column on its way to Kaniguram and Makin. And thereafter he was to see considerable further service in the Tochi and the Kurram, both as a regimental officer and on the Staff. -

That Michael Burt campaigned with his eyes open ; that in the course of his soldiering he absorbed and assimilated the true spirit and atmosphere of the North-West Frontier ; that he has studied and been deeply influenced by the military history of the borderland, both in modern times and in the heyday of the Punjab Frontier Force ; and that the passing years have

## *Foreword*

endowed him with the faculty of distilling his experiences and his reading into first-rate fiction : all these things must be apparent to anyone who, knowing the Frontier, reads this book. It is essentially a work of fiction, in that the names of persons and places are mostly imaginary and that even the dates are not intended to be taken seriously. Yet some of the incidents are at least inspired either by history or by personal experience, and in any case it is a book so surely based on actuality of knowledge and authenticity of atmosphere that it can justly claim to be considered a real contribution to the genuine literature of the North-West Frontier.

In these sad days, when fighting is so largely the trade of the technician and the propagandist, and war has become a vast, impersonal business of whole nation against whole nation, many will find it restful and refreshing to let their minds rove back to the "little wars" of other days, when personal wit and initiative still counted for more than mere weight of numbers. Nowhere in our military history have such qualities been more in demand and more in evidence than on the North-West Frontier of India : and I know of no recent Frontier fiction wherein they are more happily exemplified than in this present book.

BIRDWOOD, F.-M.

DEAL CASTLE, KENT.

# LEAN BROWN MEN

## *Book I*

### MOONRISE AT FORT MARJORIE

#### I

IT must have been about half-past three in the afternoon when Sepoy Sher Singh, the sentry on the battlements above the north gate of Fort Marjorie, first sighted the approaching Pathan. It was a blazing hot day in July, and, in addition to the glare, intermittent sheets and whirls of dust, driven over the sun-scorched plain by a fitful wind, made visibility extremely difficult.

It was during a momentary lull between gusts that Sher Singh noticed a movement near the junction of two wide nullahs about half a mile away. Then the wind got up again, and drew a curtain of dust across his line of vision. By the time it had subsided Sher Singh had taken off his glare-glasses and focused his binoculars on the spot, and he was rewarded by the sight of a Pathan in dirty white clothes striding along the bottom of the nullah which led almost up to the fort. The Pathan's features were hidden by the tail of his turban, which he had wrapped round his face as a protection from the wind and

## *Lean Brown Men*

dust, but the sentry judged from his vigorous stride and athletic bearing that he must still be a youngish man. Sher Singh noticed, too, that he carried no rifle—nor, indeed, were any arms visible at all, though that counts for little on the border. Then the dust-clouds blotted him out once more.

Sher Singh hesitated. He was a smart young sepoy and thoroughly conversant with his orders, but for the moment he was uncertain which of them would apply to the present case. Less than three hundred yards to the west stood a tall, whitewashed pillar—one of the many hundreds which serve to demarcate the frontier—and, had the Pathan appeared on the far side of that, it would have been the sentry's duty to open fire on him without warning, so soon as he came within effective range. For the Sirkar was at war with the tribes in those parts, and any man who showed himself on the wrong side of that line of cairns did so at his own risk. But this man was in British territory, apparently unarmed, and approaching the fort without concealment. As a good Sikh, Sher Singh would have had but little compunction in putting a bullet into any Pathan whom Fate cared to send into his field of fire, but he knew that such action would in all probability lead to considerable unpleasantness for himself, and he had no wish to imperil his chances of promotion.

All things considered, it seemed best to treat this stranger as "an unauthorized person

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

approaching his post," and to turn out the guard, thus passing on the responsibility to the havildar. But the guardroom was at the far side of the fort, and his shout would inevitably awaken the entire garrison. If he raised his voice, not only the guard but the whole company would come tumbling out, Indian Officers and all—perhaps even Wise Sahib himself—and what would they say if their siesta were interrupted for no valid reason? To Western minds this consideration may seem unsoldierly, but those who have lived in a mud-fort on the North-West Frontier in July, with the thermometer well over 120° in the shade, may understand Sher Singh's reluctance to arouse his comrades unnecessarily.

Taking advantage of another gap in the dust-curtain, he examined the situation anew.

The Pathan was only about six hundred yards away by now, and consequently more plainly visible. Yes, he was certainly making for the fort, for had he been bound for the village, a mile to the south-east, he would already have quitted the nullah and branched off half-left. What could he want? Pathans, even the so-called "friendly" villagers, generally give forts a wide berth.

Well, something must be done. There would be the devil to pay if he allowed this stranger to get right up to the walls without so much as warning the guard commander, and Sher Singh was in no mood to endanger those visionary lance-



## *Lean Brown Men*

stripes. He must do his duty, and risk the unpopularity.

The sentry had turned round and was just opening his mouth to shout across to the guard-room, when his problem was solved by the unexpected appearance of the guard commander himself. Havildar Ram Singh, a morose but efficient N.C.O. of fifteen years' service, was no great friend of Sher Singh's, but on this occasion at least the latter was glad to see him. The havildar was apparently preparing to make a round of the sentries, but, observing Sher Singh's gestures, he quickly made his way along the battlements to the north gate and gruffly inquired what was amiss. The sentry pointed through the dust-veiled glare, and handed the binoculars to his superior.

"I was just about to turn out the guard when you appeared, havildar-ji," he explained, as Ram Singh focused the glasses, "but as it is only one man, and unarmed, I hesitated to give the alarm."

The havildar grunted, and waited for the dust to clear away. Then, having scrutinized the stranger's appearance as closely as possible, he lowered the binoculars and turned to his subordinate.

"Stay here and keep him in view through this loophole, Sher Singh," he ordered, "while I turn out the guard and inform the Subadar Sahib. Do not fire, and make no sound till I return."

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

And he strode away as silently as he had come.

A minute later the havildar returned with the remainder of the guard and the senior Indian Officer, Subadar Hari Singh, who in turn took stock of the situation. The subadar was a burly, white-bearded man, with nearly thirty years' service to his credit—capable, efficient, and phlegmatic. It was characteristic of him that, instead of allowing his whole attention to be absorbed by the solitary tribesman advancing so innocently from the north, his first action was to send word to the sentries on the remaining walls to make a thorough examination of every inch of country visible from their posts. A quarter of a century in the Frontier Force had taught him that it is a favourite stratagem of the Pathan to keep his enemy guessing by means of a frontal demonstration while the main attack prepares to fall on flank or rear, and, although on this occasion the sentries quickly reported "all clear," Hari Singh felt easier in his mind for having taken the precaution.

In the circumstances, the subadar decided that a policy of wait-and-see would best meet the present situation. It would be absurd to alarm the garrison just because a single Pathan was approaching the fort, and in the middle of such a hot afternoon he hesitated even to disturb Wisc Sahib unless some real emergency arose. Captain Wisc was always preaching the gospel of initiative to his Indian officers; within reasonable bounds he liked them to act on their own,

## *Lean Brown Men*

and hated being bothered with trivial details. This Pathan might not be coming to the fort at all ; the nullah along which he was advancing petered out less than a hundred yards from the north wall, and it was quite possible that he had only chosen it as his route because it afforded some degree of protection from the blistering wind. When he came to the end of it he might turn left and branch off towards the village after all. There was no actual regulation forbidding local inhabitants to approach a fort, though few ventured to do so, the atmosphere being considered unhealthy.

In an expectant silence the little group of watchers waited to see what would happen. The guard, reinforced by a Lewis-gun, manned the loopholes along the wall, while the subadar, binoculars glued to his eyes, noted every movement of the mysterious stranger.

Still striding lustily, the Pathan in due course emerged from the nullah and paused for a moment, one hand shading his eyes from the glare as he scanned the apparently deserted battlements and the fast-closed wooden gate below. Seeing no sign of life, he advanced steadily and without hesitation to within a dozen yards of the wall, and halted again. Then he threw aside the end of his turban from his face, cupped both hands about his mouth, and lifted up his voice in a stentorian hail.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

### II

Fort Marjorie stood—and still stands—in that desolate tract of border territory known as British Retistan : a barren, stony plain which lies like a triangular wedge between Waziristan on the north and Baluchistan on the south. There is a saying in those parts that when Allah had finished making the rest of the world he created this land from the dross and rubble that remained, and stocked it with a race of hardy, bitter-souled men, who, alone of all the peoples of the earth, could endure its hardships and scrape a meagre living from its unfruitful soil. Such, indeed, is Retistan, and such are the Raghza Khel Pathans who inhabit it—tall, spare, sinewy men for the most part ; fair-skinned and hawk-featured, with the love of fighting bred in their bones and an aptitude for marauding begotten of sheer necessity ; hot-blooded men, fearless and cunning.

“Trust a snake before a harlot, and a harlot before a Pathan,” says the adage of northern India; and of all the tribes on the border the Raghza Khel are perhaps the most deserving of the aspersion.

The Administrative Border cuts clean across the centre of Retistan from north to south, a distance of nearly seventy miles. Fort Marjorie stands near the south-western corner of the British, or cis-frontier, portion, while two similar outposts divide the remainder of the frontage

## *Lean Brown Men*

between them, at intervals of twenty miles or so. At Khanzai, thirty miles to the east, there is a small cantonment, the headquarters of a mixed brigade and of the local civil administration. To the west lie the plains and foot-hills which constitute the greater part of that dreary no-man's-land known as Tribal Territory.

The name of Fort Marjorie appears in the English press perhaps twice or thrice in every decade—that is, as often as it is sacked or burned—and on such occasions there are never wanting imaginative journalists who evolve romantic but quite unwarranted stories concerning the beautiful English girl of bygone days in whose honour the fort is said to be named. Sometimes she is merely the wife or sweetheart of the man who built it; sometimes (when other news is scarce and a column has to be filled) she becomes a gallant and devoted young Amazon who, to be near the man she loved, disguised herself as a soldier and lost her life there fighting by his side. Unfortunately, a glance at the local ordnance map suggests a less glamorous explanation, for the name of the nearest village is Majri, and had been so for at least a hundred years before the first Englishman set foot in those parts. But “Marjorie” was too obvious a nickname to be disregarded, and for the last half-century the corruption has been in universal use even in official reports, though, strangely enough, the village itself is never known otherwise than as Majri.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

In times of peace the three forts along the Retistan border are manned by local levies, or militia—that is, by Pathans from the British side of the frontier who take service with the Government, by whom they are drilled and trained into fairly efficient irregular troops. Up to a point this arrangement works well enough, and, under carefully chosen British officers, the levies take an almost sporting delight in policing the district and foiling the periodical foraging raids which their trans-border brethren make into Government territory. Generally speaking, the British lion is a tolerant and long-suffering creature, slow to anger and prepared to look with apparently unseeing eyes upon quite a number of liberties and insults which would provoke a less magnanimous animal to swift punitive action. But now and then its tormentors go too far, and then there is trouble.

There had been serious trouble in Retistan a couple of weeks before this story opens—or rather it was then that the mischief, which had been brewing for a year or more, came to the boil. A new leader had arisen amongst the trans-border Raghza Khel, a youngish man named Tura Baz Khan, who boasted openly that he had first seen the light in the royal harem at Kabul. However that might be, he had arrived unexpectedly from over the Afghan border, had claimed relationship to the aged Khan of the tribe, and had infused such a new and martial spirit into the Raghza Khel that a clash with the Government of India could obviously not be long postponed. Under

## *Lean Brown Men*

his leadership raids on British territory had doubled and trebled in frequency, and they were carried out with such daring and tactical skill that they were patently the conception of an unusually subtle mind. But Tura Baz had done more than this, for he had somehow contrived to enter into secret negotiations with the cis-frontier tribesmen serving in the militia, and had suborned them to such good effect that on a preconcerted date the garrisons of the three forts had with one accord mutinied, slain their British officers, and decamped across the border laden with rifles, ammunition, equipment and supplies. Nor could it have been by mere chance that the date of the mutiny coincided with that selected by the Field Treasure-Chest Officer for his monthly visit to Fort Marjoric. He, too, was killed, and his treasure-chest, containing more than twenty thousand rupees in cash, vanished like everything else.

Thereafter, events moved swiftly. The simultaneous break-down of the telegraph lines to all three forts told its own story to the Brigadier at Khanzai as clearly as any messenger could have done, and three squadrons of cavalry were despatched within the hour to investigate the position. They found the forts deserted and gutted, containing little more than the naked and mutilated bodies of the British officers. Moreover, one of these squadrons was ambushed and badly shot-up during its return journey, though its route lay entirely in British territory.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

News of the disaster flashed along the wires from Khanzai to Rawalpindi, from Rawalpindi to Simla, from Simla to Whitehall. In several cantonments in the Punjab staff-officers and adjutants unlocked dusty black despatch-boxes labelled "MOBILIZATION," and thousands of telegrams were sent off recalling personnel on leave and furlough.

Meanwhile, the Brigadier at Khanzai had taken prompt measures to reoccupy the abandoned forts with regular troops. He had in his brigade a famous Frontier Force battalion, the Nth Piffers, and a company of these seasoned warriors was moved without delay to each fort, to hold the border until the expeditionary force should be ready to pass through. Hundreds of camel-loads of supplies and ammunition were deposited in each outpost; the telegraph lines were hastily repaired, and since it was suspected that the native signallers had played a considerable part in co-ordinating the details of the mutiny, a British telegraphist was now told off to each garrison. A reward of two thousand rupees was offered for the body of Tura Baz, alive or dead, though there appeared to be little hope that it would ever be claimed, for he and his men had by now withdrawn into their own country and it was unlikely that anyone would be found on this side of the frontier brave enough to betray his whereabouts, even if they were known.

For more than a fortnight now Adrian Wise



## *Lean Brown Men*

and the Sikh company of the *Nth* Piffers had been manning Fort Marjorie, but during the whole of that time not a shot had been fired nor a single sign of life observed on the far side of the border. It was almost as if Tura Baz and his men had realized the enormity of their latest venture and fled from the wrath to come, perhaps abandoning their scattered villages in the foot-hills and seeking the hospitality of some other tribe until the Sirkar's punitive expedition should have come and gone. Such a theory, however, accorded ill with the notorious intrepidity of the Raghza Khel and their leader, and both Wisc at Fort Marjorie and the Brigadier at Khanzai were disquieted by the unnatural calm.

Many hard things are said of the Pathan, but, to do him justice, it is not his custom to seek safety in flight or to give the appearance of avoiding the consequences of his deeds. In sending his best troops to garrison the border forts, the Brigadier had reckoned on their having to deal with a series of determined raids into British territory. Yet day after day the telegraphed reports contained nothing but the monotonous formula of "Situation Normal." The drafting and transmission of these reports had in time become a standing joke between Captain Wisc and Signalman Futter, his telegraphist ; indeed, the latter had long since presented his commanding officer with a complete pad of message-forms ready prepared with this text, which only needed dating and signing.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

These two were the only white men in Fort Marjorie, and they lived in adjoining rooms under the south battlements. The real officers' quarters were in the north-east bastion, but they were utterly unfit for occupation, and, even had they been otherwise, Wise was sufficiently imaginative to dislike the idea of inhabiting the rooms in which the tortured remains of his predecessor had been found. So he had chosen a small room leading out of the signal-office, and there he worked, ate, and slept, while the clicking of Futter's telegraph instrument next door gave him a comfortable feeling of being in touch with headquarters. Not that Wise felt the need of company, for roughly half his service had been spent in lonely outposts of this kind, and he was quite accustomed to going for weeks without speaking his own language or hearing it spoken.

Signalman Futter, on the other hand, was only too grateful for the close proximity of a fellow-countryman, even if the latter were an officer. Thomas Atkins is a gregarious soul, and hopelessly bad at amusing himself during long periods of enforced leisure. In bulk he mixes well enough with his Indian brothers-in-arms, but the prospect of being the only white soldier at Fort Marjorie had sent Futter's heart down into his boots when he was detailed for the duty. After the manner of his kind he had at once reported sick, with a variety of ailments so comprehensive and yet so devoid of normal symptoms that an experienced medical officer had had no hesitation

## *Lean Brown Men*

in passing him fit. Subsequent expostulations on the subject of rations and cooking arrangements had met with a similarly unsympathetic response, and, indeed, the staff at Khanzai had exhibited a perfectly damnable efficiency in providing against all such difficulties.

Albert George Futter was a bullet-headed young man of twenty-three, and formerly an undistinguished inhabitant of that London district colloquially known as "The Elephant." Five years in a technical Corps had done little to smarten up his naturally slouching gait, and, although he was a fair telegraphist, it would be an exaggeration to assert that he was in any way an ornament to the Corps on whose honoured rolls his name was borne.

A grouser by instinct, he had perhaps never groused quite so heartily as on the day when he grudgingly reported himself to Captain Wise at Khanzai, prior to the march to Fort Marjorie. The sight of the smart, well-drilled company of Sikhs who were to be his comrades until further notice aroused in him a proletarian sense of antagonism. Like many of his kidney he affected to despise smartness in any form, and it riled him still more to observe that these sepoys, who by the very colour of their skins proclaimed themselves his racial inferiors, should have the audacity to show signs of being better soldiers than himself.

He had been barely civil to Wise, who had greeted him affably, made tender inquiries about his kit and haversack-rations, and suggested that

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

they should march together at the head of the column. And so they had started off, the officer mildly chagrined by the morose and unattractive personality of his telegraphist, the latter determined to prove his theory that smartness and efficiency do not necessarily go together by "marching them nigs off their bleeding feet," as he expressed it to himself. In view of which it is painful to record that, whereas Wise and his Sikhs finished the thirty-mile march with astonishingly few signs of fatigue, Signalman Futter accomplished the last dozen miles perched ingloriously on top of a baggage-camel, his feet bruised and bleeding with the rough going, and his soul sick within him at the indignity of his case.

So again when Fort Marjorie was reached. Futter, if he had considered the matter at all, had pictured a second edition—smaller perhaps, but similar as regards comfort and design—of the great Moghul fort at Agra, where he had been stationed a couple of years previously. Instead, he beheld a remarkably plain and ugly little structure, some eighty yards square, with twenty-foot walls and loopholed battlements, the whole built of mud and in a sad state of disrepair. For miles in every direction stretched the stony, featureless plain, except to the south-west, where the gaunt outlines of the jagged foot-hills showed dark against the brazen sky. As he wandered hopelessly and disconsolately round the fort's interior, a phrase came back to him which had

## *Lean Brown Men*

been a favourite with the minister of the chapel where his parents had worshipped—"the abomination of desolation." He had never troubled before to think what that meant, but now Fort Marjorie seemed to provide him with a perfect illustration.

He shuddered as he peered into the grim depths of the well which constituted the garrison's sole water-supply: the surface was thick with green scum, and obscenely distended frogs splashed sickeningly therein.

A minute later he was retching violently as he fled from a certain room in the north-east bastion—a room in which the floor, walls, and overturned furniture were drenched and spattered with the blood of the late Commandant.

Hastening thence blindly across the courtyard, Futter had stumbled by chance on the deserted signal-office, and the sight of the familiar instruments steadied his nerves and made him feel more at home. Instinctively he had tested the battery, adjusted the sounder, and pressed the key, sending the "*KZ*" that was the call-sign of Khanzai. To his amazement the sounder immediately clicked in reply: "*MJR—MJR—MJR*," which he rightly deduced to be Fort Marjorie's station-call. It came as a shock to him to realize that, after all, he was not wholly cut off from his own kind. . . .

"Lumme, if that wasn't ole Len Roberts on the key . . . you could tell from the way 'e clipped 'is dots. . . ."

### *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

"KZ v MJR; KZ v MJR; *INT*\* Who R U?"

"Here Robts; *INT* Tht U, Bert?"

"Sure thing, Len; *INT* R U OK?"

"OK. *INT* Wht srt place is MJR?"

"B. awfl. Worse thn KZ."

"Go on. *INT* R U homesick?"

"Am I hell. Glad I can't C U, U ugly soor."

"Same here. *INT* Any mssge?"

"Not yet. Offcr 2 busy welwrsng nigs. Call U later."

"OK. *INT* Whl srt offcr hve U?"

"Looks b. awfl . . ."

and so on, until Wisc came into the signal-office, cheerfully congratulated him on the speedy re-establishment of communications, and scribbled a message to headquarters to announce the successful and uneventful re-occupation of Fort Marjorie.

### III

During the fortnight which followed, both Wisc and Futter found it necessary to revise to some extent their first impressions of each other. Adrian Wisc, for his part, went out of his way to lighten so far as possible the tedium and discomfort of Futter's life—partly out of good-nature; partly because, like most Indian Army

\* Interrogative signal.

## *Lean Brown Men*

officers, he had little or no experience of British troops, and exaggerated ideas as to the necessity for molly-coddling them. He therefore made a point of dropping into the signal-office for an occasional chat, and instructed his own orderly to attend to the signalman's comfort. He lent him books, and he endured without complaint the almost incessant chatter of the telegraph sounder when Futter indulged in unofficial conversations with his comrades at Khanzai. At the same time he carefully concealed his own very adequate knowledge of Morse, and, being endowed with a sense of humour, he derived considerable amusement from Futter's highly-coloured and mendacious accounts of life in the fort.

What was more, Wise noted with satisfaction that he had risen in his telegraphist's estimation from "*B. awfl*" to "*Nt so dsty*."

Albert George Futter by slow degrees began to respond to treatment. For the first few days he suffered from what the French call *le cafard*, but this gradually wore off and he became more resigned to his fate. For the first time in his life he was living in close contact with an officer, and the experience was good for him. He began to feel ashamed of his own eternal grouches and complaints about the same petty hardships which Wise bore quite cheerfully. It dawned on him that the latter, despite his rank and breeding, was a "good sort." He discovered, too, that the Sikhs were ready enough to fraternize, and to

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

exchange pleasantries with him in an atrocious mixture of Cockney and Punjabi. They courteously called him "Sahib," as if he were an officer, and he, by way of returning the compliment, forbore to refer to them openly as "nigs." From them and from Wise he learned many things that had been obscure to him before : why, for example, one must never offer tobacco to a Sikh ; why Sikhs wear their hair long, and coiled into a bun on the top of the head ; why every Sikh bears the cognomen of Singh ; and a dozen other mysteries.

It was on a Sunday afternoon that the solitary Pathan presented himself at Fort Marjorie.

The heat was intense that day, and Wise had long since abandoned all hope of sleeping through the weary hours between lunch and tea-time. Instead, he lay on his camp-bed in the dim little room beside the signal-office, clad in a gauze singlet and a towel, and tried to write letters. The weekly ration convoy was due at dawn on the morrow, and that provided the garrison with its one and only mail service.

In the adjoining room Signalman Futter also was displaying unwonted literary energy. In normal times the idea of writing a letter crossed his mind perhaps once in three months, but this seemingly unending spell of enforced idleness made him seize upon any pastime that would while away an hour. After the midday meal he had spent some time "chatting" to the tele-



## *Lean Brown Men*

graphist on duty at Khanzai, but at length, having exhausted every possible topic of conversation, he had abandoned the pursuit in favour of writing.

His method was both ingenious and unusual, for, by inserting a couple of sheets of carbon-paper between three of His Majesty's pink message-forms, he had contrived to write three letters at once. This multiple epistle began with the non-committal words, "My dearest little Woman," and was of an amorous nature. When it was done, he detached the forms from the pad and sealed up the three missives in buff O.H.M.S. envelopes. These he inscribed respectively with the names of a corporal's wife in Agra, another corporal's wife in Ferozepore, and (his latest conquest) a corporal's wife in Khanzai. Futter disapproved of corporals, but they had their uses.

This done, he sucked his indelible pencil earnestly for some moments, searching his mind for other possible correspondents—or co-respondents. But it is pleasant to record that, when at last he set to work again, he used no carbon-paper, and that the first words he wrote were "Dear Auntie."

He was just collecting his thoughts and admiring the colourful effect of well-sucked violet copying pencil on pink paper, when he was aware of voices in the next room. The communicating door stood half-open, and Futter, craning his neck indignantly to see who this disturber of the

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

Sabbath calm might be, observed with some surprise that it was Subadar Hari Singh—or “The Arch-Whisker,” as he had irreverently dubbed that gallant old warrior. . . .

“’Struth, what would ’e be wanting at this un’oly hour? Like as not Ole Wizzy would be brownd-off at being disturbed just as ’e was ’aving a spot of shut-eye, or writing to ’is gal. . . . Coo, they don’t ’alf jabber. Wish they’d talk English. . . .”

And then, as if one disturbance at a time were not enough, the sounder started clicking out a string of procedure-signals, indicating that Khanzai had a message for him. Futter groaned and swore, regretfully tore the beginning of Auntie’s letter from his message-pad, inserted a piece of carbon-paper between the next two sheets, resucked his pencil and sent the signal for “Go on.”

It was a very dull message from the Brigade Supply Officer, concerned with ration-strengths and packing material, and far longer than it need have been.

Half-way through the sounder went dead ; a moment later it came to life again, but very faintly. Futter had missed a word, so he pressed his key and signalled for a repetition. A couple of meaningless clicks was all the answer he got. He fiddled with the adjusting-screw without effect. He examined the battery leads and every visible connection.

Nothing doing.

## *Lean Brown Men*

The sounder gave one further solitary click and fell utterly silent.

Automatically and instinctively Futter got up from his bench and set to work with the test-panel which hung on the wall. Bringing a local battery into play, he tested the line in turn for continuity, contact, short-circuit, and earth-faults. At the last test the galvanometer needle flicked over and showed fifty degrees of earth.

Futter looked at it incredulously, scratching his head and making clicking noises with his tongue.

"Line earthed, eh? . . . Now, 'ow the blue 'ell? . . ."

He quickly examined every inch of wiring in his own office: nothing wrong there. Khanzai would have done the same by now, so the fault must be somewhere out on the line. Rum go, though, getting an earth like that on an overhead line. The wire must be in contact with one of the galvanized-iron poles somewhere or other. . . . Some nig been 'eaving rocks at it and busted an insulator. . . . Well, better report to Ole Wizzy, as per standing orders—not that 'e could do nothink about it, nor nobody else neither, except a lineman. . . .

## IV

When Subadar Hari Singh broke in upon his commanding officer's siesta to announce the fact

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

that a Pathan had arrived at the fort and was demanding an immediate audience with him, Adrian Wise sat up on his bed and wrinkled his forehead with surprise.

"He knows but a dozen words of Punjabi, *huzoor*," the old subadar continued, spreading out his hands, "and my own knowledge of Pushtu is even less, so I could not discover his business, even were he willing to confide in me. Nevertheless, when I told him that you were asleep and that he must at least wait till evening, he protested with great vehemence that the matter was of extreme urgency, so I thought it best to disturb your Honour."

"Quite right, Subadar Sahib," rejoined the Commandant, reaching for a shirt and a pair of shorts. "Let him be carefully searched for concealed arms—these folk sometimes carry a knife between the thighs, remember—and brought to me here at once, with an escort."

By the time Wise had performed a simple toilet and was presenting an appearance sufficiently dignified to uphold the honour of His Majesty's Government, a trampling of feet outside the door announced that his orders had been carried out, and a moment later he was looking across the camp-table at his unexpected visitor.

The latter was a well-built man of perhaps thirty-five—tall, slim, and handsome in his way. His finely-chiselled features were no darker in colour than those of many a sunburned Englishman, though they suggested an ancestry that was

## *Lean Brown Men*

Semitic rather than Aryan. Sleek black hair, "bobbed" to the level of his neck, fell from under a carelessly tied blue turban, and a gallantly trimmed black moustache adorned his upper lip. His long white shirt, worn outside the baggy trousers, was discoloured with dust and sweat, yet he bore himself like a king and, despite the armed escort hedging him in, there was neither fear nor subservience in the steady black eyes which met Wise's.

The officer returned his visitor's salaam with a careless wave of the hand, and greeted him in Pushtu.

"May you never be tired, Pathan!"

"May you never be weary, sahib!"

"Who are you, and whence do you come?"

"My name, sahib, is Adam Khan, and I come from Tor Raghza, in the foot-hills."

"Ah, from across the border, then?"

"Even so, sahib."

"You are welcome. But what seek you here?"

The Pathan hesitated a moment, swallowed hard, and clenched his hands as they hung by his sides. When he replied he appeared to be struggling to keep his voice free of emotion.

"I seek vengeance, sahib; vengeance on my enemy!"

Wise raised his eyebrows and gave a little shrug of the shoulders.

"And what have I to do with you and your enemies, Pathan?" he inquired gently. "Me-

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

thinks, if you live where you say, then you and I are enemies already——”

“Nay, sahib !” Adam Khan broke in, with a decisive gesture, “I am no enemy of the Sirkar, nor have I ever been—though I confess that in former days, when I was young and hot-headed, I helped to raid these border villages often enough. But I had no hand in the attack on the forts or the murder of the sahibs, nor have I shared in the spoils. That was the work of Tura Baz—that swine-begotten adulterer—and he it is who is my enemy !”

Despite his efforts at self-control the Pathan's voice had risen almost to a shout. Adrian Wise, lighting a cigarette with well-assumed indifference, looked quickly into his eyes and read sincerity therein. He impatiently waved away Signalman Futter, who was hovering in the door of the signal-office, and motioned to his visitor to proceed.

“And why is Tura Baz your enemy, Adam Khan ?”

The Pathan gulped, and flashed a glance around him. “These Sikhs do not speak Pushtu, sahib ?” he muttered. “I would not willingly tell the story to be mocked at by unshorn unbelievers.”

“The Subadar Sahib is the most erudite, Pathan, and you yourself have already gathered how little is his knowledge,” Wise replied.

“Good ! Well, the matter is simply told, sahib, though it shames me to speak the words.

## *Lean Brown Men*

Yet, if I do not speak them how can you believe that I truly hate Tura Baz, and only live to be avenged on him? So be it, then."

Wise already had an idea of what was coming, for he had known the Frontier for many years. And, since he knew that Pathans are shy of discussing their womenfolk and only do so in circumstances of the greatest urgency, he tactfully looked down at his table and drew battle-ships on his writing-pad while the story was unfolded.

Some ten days previously, Adam Khan explained, Tura Baz had arrived at Tor Raghza to enlist the men of that village in the *lashkar* which he was raising to oppose the British punitive expedition that would soon be launched against the tribe. Adam Khan, as one of the most influential inhabitants, had offered the leader the hospitality of his house, and Tura Baz had remained under his roof for three nights and two days. At dawn on the third day Adam Khan had awakened to find his guest missing, and with him had disappeared also his—Adam Khan's—sixteen-year-old daughter, the sole occupant of his zenana since his wife had died. Nor had the maiden fled with him willingly, it seemed, for her room was in great disorder and there were signs of a brutally unequal struggle.

Hot with rage and shame (for he knew that Tura Baz already had the full complement of four wives allowed to a Mussulman, and that his

### *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

daughter was therefore to be no more than an unofficial concubine), Adam Khan had set out in vengeful pursuit, following the rough mountain track leading to the village which Tura Baz had told him would be his next recruiting centre. But when he arrived there, half-mad with anger and thirst, he was told that Tura Baz had not passed that way ; and only then did he realize that he had been given designedly false information as to his enemy's route. For days he had toiled distractedly from village to village in those inhospitable hills, but never once could he get on the track of his daughter and her abductor. Tura Baz seemed to have vanished utterly, and at length Adam Khan, heart-broken and disconsolate, had retraced his footsteps.

He paused in his story, and Wise, looking up from his scribbling, made a non-committal noise expressive of sympathy. A sordid enough story, to be sure, and bad luck on the girl and her father ; but what, after all, had it to do with him ? Did Adam Khan expect him to turn out and search the hills for his enemy ?

" This is indeed a bad business, Adam Khan," he said quietly, " and it grieves me that one Pathan should break faith with another, whose salt he has eaten. Yet there be many such men in this world, as we all know. Why do you come here to tell me this tale of shame ? You say that you seek vengeance : but how can I help you ? For the present, at any rate, my duty lies wholly on this side of the border, and I may not, without



## *Lean Brown Men*

permission, quit my fort and join in your search—nor would such permission be given if asked for.”

The Pathan nodded, and grunted understandingly.

“That is true, sahib,” he replied, “nor am I such a fool as to think you would be drawn over the border on such an errand—for what are my poor affairs to you? Nevertheless, I have heard that the Sirkar also desires the downfall of Tura Baz.”

Wise nodded. “Naturally,” he agreed.

“And I have heard, too,” continued Adam Khan, “that a reward of a thousand rupees will be paid for his capture.”

“Two thousand,” amended Wise, watching his visitor curiously.

The Pathan shrugged his shoulders. “One thousand or two thousand—what does it matter?” he said contemptuously. “I do not seek the money, sahib, though I am a poor man. I seek only vengeance, and you may give the reward to your Sikhs or do what you will with it, if only you will help me.”

“Yes—but how?” the officer demanded impatiently.

“Listen, sahib.” Adam Khan had lowered his voice and was now speaking with a passionate eagerness that betrayed the depth of his feeling. “Last night I had word from a sure source that Tura Baz will be across the border to-night! Ah, that news interests the sahib far more than

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

all I have said already ! And well it may, for that hell-born dog now seeks to shame you even as he has already shamed me ! ”

“ I do not understand you, Pathan,” murmured Wise, blowing out a cloud of smoke. “ I have no daughter to be wrested——”

“ Nay, sahib—that is only a manner of speech. This is no matter of womenfolk, but you have your honour as a British officer, and it is that which Tura Baz would violate. Sahib, as the commander of this fort you are responsible for the peace and safety of this district—is that not true ? And to-night Tura Baz plans to strike a blow which shall discredit both you and the British Raj.”

“ Indeed ! So the Raghza Khel would assault my fort to-night, would they ? ”

“ Nay, sahib ; nothing so foolish as that. The fort, with a company of Sikhs behind its walls, is well-nigh impregnable, and Tura Baz is not the man to gamble away his prestige on such a chancy venture. Nay, rather does he seek to wound you by showing your impotence in safeguarding your district from attack ! ”

Adrian Wise felt his pulses quicken, but the expression on his face never varied as he gazed steadily into the speaker's eyes. “ Majri village, then ? ” he inquired almost casually.

The Pathan nodded sharply. “ Majri village is to be sacked and burned this very night, sahib,” he replied quietly. “ Even now Tura Baz and a picked *lashkar* of young men are assembling

## *Lean Brown Men*

somewhere over there"—he flung a hand with unerring instinct to the south-west—"and when the moon rises they will fall upon Majri, kill every man where he sleeps, carry off every desirable woman and child, hurriedly loot the houses and shops, and finally set fire to the village before leaving. Like all the raids planned by that devil, it will be carried out at lightning speed, each man having his task allotted in advance. There will be no shooting, and, since the village is fully two thousand paces from the fort, even the sentries will be unaware of anything amiss till they see the flames, and by then it will be too late!"

Adrian Wise drew three coquettish wisps of smoke emerging from the funnels of his latest battleship. Then he threw down his pencil and whistled the first bars of the pirates' song from *Jolly Roger*—

Barratry, arson, rape, and slaughter!

—which words seemed singularly appropriate to the occasion, with the possible exception of the first. He must remember to look up "barratry" when he could get hold of a dictionary.

"Now this is most interesting, Adam Khan," he exclaimed at length. "Is it also by any chance true?"

"Is it true?" echoed the Pathan indignantly. "Sahib, if it were not true, why should I have put myself in your power to tell it to you? We Raghza Khel are no cowards, yet it was not

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

altogether easy for me to come to your fort, alone and unarmed, and deliver myself into the midst of a company of the Khalsa."

Wise nodded. The point was well made. Yet——. "I threw no doubt on your word, Pathan," he said, "but merely questioned the source of your information, for in view of what you have told me I take it that you have had no speech with Tura Baz in person since—er—since he left you a week ago?"

Adam Khan laughed throatily. "When next I see that dog there will be but little speech on either side, sahib!" was the grim reply. "Nay, but my news is from a sure source, I tell you. The word has gone round openly across the border, and I know it to be true. Tura Baz was plotting some such insult to the Sirkar even before he stole my daughter, though at that time no details were known. Now I know it is at Majri that he will strike, and that it is for to-night, at moonrise."

"With how many men?" demanded Wise.

"With two hundred, sahib. Majri is but a small village, and Tura Baz always works with as few men as possible."

"So I have heard. From which direction comes the raid? Past here?"

"Nay, sahib—from the south-east. They will cross the border far to the south and work round under cover of darkness."

"H'm. It's quite feasible, of course. And now, Adam Khan, touching the matter of venge-

## *Lean Brown Men*

ance whereof you spoke : what would you have me do ? ”

“ Sahib, I would have you leave a small garrison here and yourself march out by night to a position east of Majri which I myself shall show you. There is a narrow *kotal* through which the raiders must pass to reach the village, and if you have but a hundred men well posted there you can shoot them down as they pass through ; or, if there is light enough, you might charge them with the bayonet.”

“ I dare say. The matter needs some thought, Pathan, and I make no promise now. I will consult with my Sikh officers and also with the General Sahib at Khanzai, whose permission I must obtain before leaving the fort. Meanwhile, you must remain here—under guard, you understand ? Think not that I wish to be inhospitable or to dishonour you, but I am responsible for the safety of the fort, and I cannot let strangers roam about at will.”

“ That is true talk, sahib ; I understand. Keep me prisoner, if you will, while you decide upon your action. If you go out to frustrate Tura Baz—God grant that you may !—then I myself will go with you if you desire it. But if you may not leave your fort, let me go unharmed, sahib, and I will procure my vengeance at some other time and by other means.”

“ Good ! ” agreed Wise, nodding. “ Subadar Sahib,” he continued in Punjabi, “ let this man be taken to the guardroom and locked securely

### *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

in a cell. Let him be given food and water and a bed to rest upon, and let no indignities be put upon him beyond the fact of his confinement. Having arranged these things, return here at once with the other platoon commanders. There is much to be discussed."

Hari Singh saluted, and marched the prisoner and escort from the room. Wise watched them go with a puzzled frown on his face, sitting motionless till they were out of sight. Then he leaned back in his chair and lifted up his voice again.

"Futter ! "

"Sir ? "

"Warn Khanzai that I'll be sending an important 'Priority' message through in a few minutes, will you? Tell them that it's to be 'phoned through to the Brigade-Major without delay—followed by a copy in writing as soon as possible, of course. Never mind if he's in bed : it'll mean having the Brigadier up too, I'm afraid. What's the signal prefix that takes precedence even over 'Priority,' Futter ? "

"'Urgent Operation,' sir," replied Futter, appearing at the door of the room ; "but, beg pardon, sir, I'm afraid you won't get no message through to Khanzai yet awhile, sir. Line's dead, sir—fifty degrees of earth on the galvo. I came in to tell you just now, sir, but you was busy with that nig—I mean, that Paythan, sir——"

"Hell's cheese ! " exploded Wise.

V

The failure of the telegraph line at this critical juncture put Adrian Wise in an awkward quandary.

His first reaction to the news was a very natural suspicion that it was inevitably connected either with Adam Khan's visit or with the impending raid on Majri—or possibly with both, for he had not yet quite decided in his mind as to the precise degree of credibility that could be attached to the story that he had just heard. But it seemed a pretty sinister coincidence, to put it mildly, that the telegraph should let him down on this particular Sunday afternoon after having been horribly and noisily efficient for the previous fortnight. He could not help remembering that a similar failure had occurred on the day of the mutiny. Indeed, the cutting of communications is a well-known and time-honoured prelude to any border outrage.

Signalman Futter, however, respectfully dissented from this view. With many a "beg pardon, sir," and by the aid of a series of roughly-drawn diagrams, he explained that the line was not cut, but "earthing"—a very different matter. The continuity of the line, he asserted, was still intact, but at some point or other along the route something had happened to cause a leakage of current to earth. It might be a broken insulator, or a fragment of loose wire, or any one of a dozen

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

other things, but he stoutly maintained that the fault was far more likely to have occurred accidentally than to have been caused deliberately. He pointed out, with reason, that any evilly-disposed person who went to the trouble of climbing an eighteen-foot tubular iron pole (which, incidentally, would be almost red-hot on a day like this) with a view to interrupting communication between Fort Marjorie and Khanzai would surely choose to do so by means of a clean cut through the wire rather than by going to a great deal more trouble to earth it. And with this view Wise had to agree.

Still, it was a nuisance, and it added greatly to his present difficulties. All the time that he had been listening to Adam Khan's story he had been counting on getting advice and authority from the Brigadier before taking any action, whereas now it appeared that he would have to rely on his own judgment. He did not shrink from that, but he would have preferred it the other way. According to Futter, it might be some hours before the fault could be located, and meanwhile the other matter was pressing.

At this point his orderly appeared with a tea-tray, and as he ate and drank he weighed up the question in his mind. First, was Adam Khan's story true or false? It had rung true, somehow, and experience had taught him that Pathans do not reveal the secrets of their family lives unless actuated by some sincere motive. Very well, then : supposing for a moment that



## *Lean Brown Men*

the tale was true, what was his duty as commandant of Fort Marjorie? Certainly not to assist Adam Khan in the prosecution of a private blood-feud—that was quite out of the question. But to save the “British” village of Majri from the nasty fate that appeared to be hanging over it, and to combine that business, perhaps, with the pleasure of laying hands on the notorious Tura Baz? Ah, that was a different kettle of fish altogether. Once let Tura Baz fall, dead or alive, into the Sirkar’s hands, and surely the whole political situation would be changed. It might even do away with the necessity for the punitive expedition which was now assembling; it might save hundreds of lives and a great deal of money. Would not the Brigadier wish him to make the attempt, at least, even if he were not wholly successful?

Further considerations crowded into his mind. The ration convoy was due at dawn—which meant about 4 a.m. Now, the moon would not be up till 2.30 or so, and that meant that if nothing were done, Tura Baz and his *lashkar*, drunk with blood and loot, would in all probability still be in the neighbourhood when the convoy appeared. What chance would a string of a hundred camels, escorted by perhaps a platoon of infantry, stand against a couple of hundred armed raiders? No, if he could not get in touch with headquarters he must undoubtedly take the responsibility on his own shoulders and try to foil the raid. If it turned out to be a

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

mare's-nest—well, he would, at any rate, have done his best.

His ruminations were interrupted at this stage by the return of Subadar Hari Singh with his three colleagues. Having saluted, they seated themselves in various parts of the room, wherever they could find perches, while Wise gave them a rapid résumé of Adam Khan's tale. Hari Singh, despite his protested ignorance of Pushtu, seemed to have gleaned a very fair idea of its outline ; and, on being suddenly asked whether he considered it true or not, he unhesitatingly answered in the affirmative. Now, this was strange, for Sikhs and Pathans are very ancient enemies, and they trust one another, generally speaking, as little as a cobra trusts a mongoose.

Wise consulted each in turn, having presented as impartially as possible the pros and cons of acting on the information received. Even the failure of the telegraph did not impress them suspiciously, for one of the Sikh officers, who had been a signaller in his younger days, bore out Futter's theory relating to the incidence of earth-faults.

For half an hour or more the conference continued, until the last order had been given and the last duty apportioned. Then it broke up, each man going away to prepare for his share in the night's work. Wise, glancing at his watch, saw that it was twenty minutes past five.

## *Lean Brown Men*

At twenty minutes past five precisely, thirty miles away at Khanzai, the Brigadier deposited his last morsel of toast in the cavernous jaws of his bull-terrier, disentangled himself from the mosquito-net, and shuffled across to the table upon which his telephone was ringing noisily. He recognized the voice of Marcus Darell, his brigade-major.

"What-ho, Marcus, me boy!" he exclaimed affably. "And what the devil's biting you at this ungodly hour?"

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," replied the voice, "but the Fort Marjorie line has been out of order since nine minutes past four, and I thought you ought to know."

"The devil it has!" murmured the Brigadier softly. "Only Fort Marjorie, Marcus? What about the others?"

"Both the others O.K., sir. And, incidentally, the signal-sergeant here says the Marjorie fault is only an 'earth,' and not a 'dis.'"

"H'm. What's that mean exactly?"

"Well, in plain English, sir, that it's more likely to be an accident than anything in the nature of sabotage."

"I see. Still, I don't like it, Marcus—devil fly away with me if I like it! What's being done about it?"

"Mounted lineman out since four-fifteen, sir, tapping-in every half-mile. He hasn't come to the fault yet, and he's gone almost as far as we dare send him without an escort."

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

The Brigadier was silent for a few seconds. "I don't like it, Marcus," he repeated at length. "It may be an accident or it may not, but I've been on and off this damned frontier for thirty-two years now, and I've yet to hear of a trick that's beyond Brother Pukhtoon. And there's another thing, too : what about that ration convoy ? "

"Exactly, sir ; I was just going to mention it. It left here last night, and is due to reach Marjorie at sparrow-fidget to-morrow."

"What escort has it ? "

"Fifty rifles of the 31st Rajputs, sir."

"The devil ! Not good enough, Marcus."

"Sir ? "

"I say, not good enough ! All right for peacetime, but what the devil could fifty ' Largefeet ' do against Tura Baz if they bumped him ? And I've a hunch that that parishioner's about somewhere. By the holy O, Marcus, I don't like this fault on the Marjorie line at all, at all."

"Then what do you propose, sir ? "

"Cavalry, Marcus, me boy ! Let you get through to the Lancers for me straight away. Give me compliments to Colonel Rugg, and say I wish his next-for-duty squadron to leave here in three-quarters of an hour. Two days' rations and fifty rounds per man ; rifles *and* lances. Got that ? "

"Yes, sir. What orders for the squadron commander ? "

"I'll see him myself before he moves off. In

## *Lean Brown Men*

fact, for two pins—yes, dammit, I will !  
Marcus ? ”

“ Sir ? ”

“ Ring up Colonel M’Grain the moment you’ve fixed with the cavalry, and tell him he’ll be commanding the brigade till I get back ! ”

“ You’re going to Marjorie, yourself, sir ? ”

“ You’ve said it, Marcus ! Me liver’s got knobs on it and it does be fraying me nerves. A thirty-mile ride is just what I need, and I’ve an idea I may be more useful out Marjorie way than I am here.”

“ Shall I come too, sir ? ” The Brigade-Major’s voice was keen.

“ No, Marcus—sorry, old boy ! Let you stay here and keep an eye on old Andy M’Grain, or I won’t know me own brigade by the time I get back ! Well, so long ! Tell the Lancers to look slippy, for we’ll have only a few hours’ daylight left when we start, and I want to go all out while we can.”

“ Very good, sir ! ”

With a grunt the Brigadier hung up the receiver ; then, roaring loudly for his bearer, he disappeared into the bathroom.

## VI

At seven o’clock Adrian Wise dined on goat rissoles and tinned pineapple, washed down by ration lime-juice and chlorinated water. As

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

usual, he felt slightly ill after the meal, but he heroically lit his pipe and pretended to enjoy it.

It was cooler now, and the sinking sun was casting a few welcome shadows. The wind had died down, too, and there was a breathless stillness over the land. Wise climbed up the rude mud stairs to the battlements and then, as a sudden afterthought, he called down to Futter.

"Line still out of order, I suppose?" he inquired for the twentieth time, when that worthy appeared at the door below.

"Yessir!"

"Well, leave it for a bit and come up here, Futter. There's more air here, and I want to talk to you."

"O.K., sir. Just 'alf a mo, sir!"

Futter believed in keeping his superiors waiting on principle. It put them in their place and made them realize that they weren't the only monkeys in the Zoo. Not that Ole Wizzy chucked 'is weight about too badly on the whole; still, he was an officer, and it wouldn't hurt him to wait a jiffy. And trust an officer to send for you just as you'd lit a fresh fag. No consideration for others, that was the trouble. . . .

In his own time, then, Futter pinched the glowing end off his cigarette and parked the butt on his table for future consumption. He did this not so much because the discipline of the Service discourages a soldier from smoking when approaching his officer as because experience had taught him that Ole Wizzy would probably pro-

## *Lean Brown Men*

duce his own cigarette-case—Turks on one side, Virgins on the other. He, Futter, would have a Turk; not that he really cared for them, but simply because they cost more. Having arrived at this prudent decision, he quitted the signal-office and mounted the steps to the battlements.

He found the Commandant hanging over the wall near the south-east corner, gazing pensively into the distance. The cigarette-case duly appeared and was put away again, and then the officer jerked his head towards Majri village, barely visible in the evening dust-haze, more than a mile away.

"I suppose you've gathered that there's something in the air, Futter?" he said. "I think I'd better give you a rough idea of the state of affairs, just in case the sounder gets going and you have to answer questions. I've already written out a message to headquarters, which you must get through at once if communication is restored, but Khanzai will probably bombard you with questions, so pay attention while I put you wise."

Wise gave a brief but succinct summary of his interview with Adam Khan, to which Futter listened attentively. He had been burning with curiosity about the stranger, and he sucked his teeth and drew in his breath with appreciative whistles as the tale unfolded itself. As a story it fulfilled many of the requirements of the type of thriller to which he was addicted; yet, when it was told, his cunning Cockney mind was quick

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

to fertilize the seeds of suspicion which certain parts of the tale had scattered there.

"Bit fishy, ain't it, sir?" he ventured, as the officer paused.

"In what way, Futter?"

"Well, sir—first of all—beg pardon, sir—if *you* 'ad a daughter, sir, and another officer come along an'—an' done 'er a wrong, sir, same like this Turra Baz 'as done to the other Paythan's girl—well, sir, I reckon you'd create little 'ell, surc enough, but you'd 'ardly nip off and tip the wink to the enemy to lay for 'im, would you? I mean to say, sir——"

"Yes, I see your point," Wise agreed, nodding, "but you've got to realize that things are a bit different on opposite sides of the border, Futter. In British India we've got law and order, police, public opinion, and a stricter outlook altogether. Abduction is a serious crime, and, apart from the punishment he'd get, no British officer would dare to show his face in public again after being convicted of such an offence. Over the border it's different. There are no written laws, no police, and precious little public opinion. Life is cheap, and a woman's honour not much dearer, except to her own near relatives. Public opinion wouldn't be shocked at this abduction as it would be on our side: on the contrary, they'd think it quite natural and even clever of Tura Baz to lay hands on any attractive girl he could get hold of, and they'd reserve all their condemnation for Adam Khan, for not having looked after his



## *Lean Brown Men*

daughter better. Which being so, what hope has Adam Khan of avenging himself? In normal times he'd take his rifle and lie up for his enemy, but Tura Baz is sure to be surrounded by friends and supporters these days, for he's the tribal commander-in-chief, so to speak. No, Futter—I myself think Adam Khan's story is plausible enough, however improbable it may seem to you. Mind you, I admit there's a risk, and I'd have liked to get the Brigadier's opinion on it before taking action, but this wretched earth-fault of yours puts the lid on that. So I've just got to act on my own."

"Very good, sir."

"I wish I had a few more men, but it can't be helped. We were sent out here bang in the middle of the furlough season and the company is badly under strength. We muster a hundred and twenty-seven rifles to-day—a hundred and twenty-eight if we count you. I'll want a hundred for my job at Majri; I could do with more, but I mustn't leave the fort quite empty, though there's no danger of it's being attacked."

"Think not, sir?" said Futter, rather uneasily.

"Bless you, no! Dash it, man, how would *you* set about attacking a place like this? Remember, they've no artillery, and I doubt if there's a ladder within twenty miles capable of reaching to the top of these walls. Oh, no, the fort's safe enough."

"Very good, sir."

"All right; and now for details. I and my

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

hundred men are pushing off from here at eleven, and we ought to be in position near Majri at least an hour before Tura Baz and his crowd get there. You'll probably hear a spot of firing about two-thirty, and if all goes well we'll be back here by dawn or soon after."

"'Ope so, sir!"

"So do I—and that we'll have Comrade Tura Baz with us! However, that remains to be seen. Meanwhile, Futter, all you've got to do is to stay here and keep out of mischief—understand? I'm leaving Subadar Hari Singh in command of the fort, but you needn't get on your hind legs about being put under a native officer or anything like that, for that's not the position at all. So long as you don't interfere with him, I'm sure he won't with you; but remember, please, that he *is* in command, and not you!"

"O.K., sir! Me and 'im gets on famous together, and I won't butt in."

"Good man! Well, that's about all, I think. I don't suppose there's much hope of the line coming through this side of to-morrow, is there? Still, I'd like you to be on hand in case it does, so sleep in the signal-office and keep one ear open. If by any chance the fault is cleared, get that message off at once, and add any further information that may have come to your knowledge."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, and Futter! I don't want to be melodramatic or any rot like that, but accidents will

## *Lean Brown Men*

happen, you know, and the Raghza Khel are pretty average tough. I mean, I might just conceivably stop a bullet or a sword-cut and get put out of action, though I don't propose to ask for it, I assure you. Anyway, in the unlikely event of anything happening to me, be a good soul and see that the two letters that I've left on my table are handed over to the O.C. ration convoy, will you? There's not the least danger really, of course, but——"

"Very good, sir—leave it to me!" Signalman Futter swallowed, and changed the subject. "By the way, sir, what about this 'ere nig—this Paythan, I mean? Keeping 'im clinked till you get back, I take it?"

"Who—Adam Khan? Bless you, no, my dear man; I can't do that! As a matter of fact, the idea is that he comes with us and shows us the best place to lie for Tura Baz—not that I need showing, for I know the ground as well as he does."

Futter clicked his tongue against his teeth and shuffled his feet, causing Wise to glance curiously at him.

"Well, what's biting you, laddie?" he inquired.

"Beg pardon, sir—it's nothink to do with me, sir—but don't you think 'e'd be safer locked up 'ere? Mean to say, sir, you'll 'ave your 'ands full out there, and if it comes to a scrap 'ow are you going to see that 'e don't get away in the dark? If you take my tip, sir, you'll keep

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

'im in that there cell till it's all over, and by then you'll know whether 'e's bin lying or not."

The Commandant massaged his chin for a moment in silence.

"Yes, that's all right, Futter," he admitted, "but only on the supposition that he's trying to double-cross us somehow. But, you sec, I'm rather gambling on his story being true, and if it is true, we shall owe him a hearty vote of thanks rather than a night in prison! In point of fact, I've no real right to lock him up at all, even temporarily. And then again, if his story is true, it seems only sporting to let him be in at the death."

"Very good, sir." Futter's tone, though respectful, indicated resignation rather than agreement.

"And yet—dash it all!—I don't want him with me really," Wise continued musingly. "He'll only be in the way, and he'll decrease my fighting strength by at least two sepoys, by way of escort. And, of course, if his game is crooked, he might play the bug in various ways in the dark—snatch a bayonet from a rifle and plunk it into my back, or something like that! Well, I'll think it over, Futter; and meanwhile, many thanks for your opinion. Anyway, you quite understand your job, don't you? Don't leave the sounder for too long at a time, and don't throw your weight about with Subadar Hari Singh. All right?"

## *Lean Brown Men*

“ Right, sir ! ”

“ Good. Well, buzz along, then ! ”

Signalman Futter clicked his heels, and buzzed along.

Left alone, Adrian Wise bent his mind once again to the problem of Adam Khan. Then he shouted for Hari Singh, and they discussed the matter afresh. It soon became manifest that the subadar, while not altogether sharing Futter's mistrust of the Pathan, nevertheless favoured the idea of keeping him under lock and key until the night's work was over ; yet he had to agree with Wise that there was no legal justification for such a course. Technically, the man might be considered an enemy, yet he was in no sense a “ prisoner of war.” He had, indeed, voluntarily submitted himself to temporary confinement, but only while his scheme was under discussion.

Wise dismissed his subordinate and strolled round to the guardroom, which stood on the battlements above the south gate. Beside the large room in which the guard was quartered there stood two narrow cells, fitted with rusty iron grilles in place of doors. In the farther of these he found Adam Khan reclining pensively on a charpoy. He had taken off his turban and shoes, but no sooner did he catch sight of his visitor than he sprang to his feet and advanced eagerly to the grille.

“ May you never be tired, sahib ! ” the Pathan

*Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

exclaimed, with a perfunctory salute. "Have you decided?"

"May you never be weary, Adam Khan!" Wise returned. "Yes, I have decided—yet I would have further speech with you touching one or two matters."

An excited glint flashed through the Pathan's eyes. "Speak, sahib!" he cried anxiously. "You will go out and capture that hell-born defiler of hospitality, Tura Baz?"

The officer nodded. "Yes, I have decided to believe your story to that extent, Adam Khan," he replied, "though God knoweth whether my decision is wise or foolish. But understand one thing clearly: that I do this thing not to assist your quest for vengeance, but because the Sirkar desires the capture of this outlaw, and I conceive it my duty to take the risk."

"I understand, sahib. The motive matters little, so long as the end be gained."

"Very well! And now, Adam Khan, we come to a second point. You offered to guide me to the *kotal* through which the raiders must pass if they attack from the direction you say. But I have no need of your guidance, for I know the way as well as yourself. Why, then, should I encumber myself with you?"

He spoke casually, but his eyes were narrowly watching the Pathan's face all the while. He saw that his words induced a momentary gleam of uneasiness, swiftly followed by a look of mingled apprehension and indignation.

## *Lean Brown Men*

"But, sahib—what will you do with me, then? Do you forget that I have risked my life to bring you this information, and that the only reward I sought was to witness my enemy's downfall? Sahib, surely that is but little to ask?"

"Nay, Pathan, I forget nothing, and if your story be true and Tura Baz fall into our hands, doubt not that you will be well rewarded. The Sirkar will hang your enemy at Khanzai, and the two thousand rupees will be yours. Is that not sufficient?"

Adam Khan bit his lip, and looked piercingly at the Commandant.

"Sahib, I will answer that question when you have said what you are going to do with me. You have no right to keep me here against my will. If I may not accompany you to Majri, will you let me go free—now?"

Wise shook his head. "I cannot do that, Adam Khan," he replied, "and yet I have no wish to hold you prisoner, for you came of your own accord and it is not the custom of the Sirkar to imprison any man until he has been judged worthy of punishment. Nevertheless, the Sirkar will hold me responsible should anything go wrong."

"Sahib, the word of a Pathan——"

"Yes, I know! You have a proverb about it, haven't you? Quite—but in the Punjab they have another proverb on the same subject, Adam Khan; maybe the truth lies somewhere between the two. Now, listen: I can spend no

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

more time debating rights and wrongs with you, nor will any good come from so doing. Rights and wrongs are shadowy things, matters of opinion ; but one fact stands out clearly, like a star seen through clouds : you are in my power ! ”

“ Of my own free will, sahib ! ”

“ Admittedly, and I do not forget that. Yet the fact remains, you are in my power. Therefore it is not a matter of what you wish me to do, but of what I *shall* do ! ”

“ Speak, sahib. I am your sacrifice ! ”

“ All right. What I shall do is this : I and my men will march from here at an hour which is my secret. One hour after our departure Subadar Hari Singh, who will command the fort in my absence, will come to you and offer you the choice between immediate liberty and remaining here until I return from Majri. If you choose the former, he will at once unlock the gate of the fort and you will be free to depart whithersoever you will. If you prefer not to leave at such an hour, you will be welcome to stay here and sleep. Think well, Adam Khan. I press for no decision now, but I would earnestly suggest that you remain, for if all goes well you will see me return at dawn with Tura Baz ! ”

Adam Khan shrugged his shoulders and laughed shortly. “ Sahib, what can I say ? ” he replied. “ You speak truly when you say that I am in your power, and it seems of little avail to protest. Yet once again I say that you have no right to confine me here like a felon. Come,



## *Lean Brown Men*

now, sahib—let us make a bargain ! Release me from this cell, but keep me within the walls of the fort, and I will gladly await your return at daybreak.”

Wise hesitated, but only for a moment. “Nay, Pathan, that cannot be. It grieves me greatly to appear discourteous and inhospitable, but I have said my last word. Be reasonable, Adam Khan. Put yourself in my position and think how you would act. I hold this fort in the name of the Sirkar, and how can I allow a Pathan—a man of a hostile tribe—to wander at will about the place ? Come, man—be patient and take your ease, and the time will soon pass. In three or four hours the Subadar will come and offer you your choice. In the meantime, have you everything you need—food—cool water—bedding ?”

“Sahib, I have all these things,” the Pathan answered sadly, “and if I must stay here I can complain of nothing but my narrow quarters. Only one other favour, sahib—a cigarette.”

“Ah, but of course !” exclaimed Wise, feeling in his pocket. “Here, take all that are in my case, Adam Khan ; see, these fat ones are from Roum, the smaller from Amerik. Take this box of matches, too. Now, is that all ?”

“All, sahib.”

“Then I shall hope to see you at dawn, Pathan ; or, if you depart before then, you will at least return when news reaches you of Tura Baz’s capture, that you may claim the reward ?”

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

"That is to be seen, sahib," replied Adam Khan. "For the present, may Allah help you and your Sikhs in your venture, and deliver my enemy into your hands!"

"That also is to be seen," was the rejoinder. "And now I go. May good lie before you, Adam Khan—*pa makhé-dé sha!*"

"*Amin tá-sara, sahib*—the same to you!"

With a friendly nod Wise strode away.

The Pathan watched him go with grave eyes and impassive face, still standing close to the grille, a rusty bar clutched in each hand. At last, when the Commandant was out of sight, he turned slowly on his heel and seated himself on the edge of the string bed. Even now that he was alone and unwatched, his handsome, hawk-like features gave little or no indication of what was passing in his mind, and for ten minutes at least he just sat there, elbows on knees and chin cupped in his palms. Then he uttered a short, throaty laugh, threw himself at full length on the bed, lit a cigarette, and closed his eyes in meditation.

## VII

Dusk fell over Fort Marjorie: a heavy, copper-hued dusk, which soon gave place to the torpid darkness of a frontier night. A few stars twinkled bravely through the dust-laden air, though these were scarcely noticeable to the

## *Lean Brown Men*

garrison by reason of the half-dozen smoky kerosene-lamps which hung at intervals round the courtyard. The heat was still stifling, and the hum of a myriad mosquitoes accentuated the breathless stillness of the night. Signalman Futter, labouring sweatily at his resumed epistle to Auntie, wrote of the atmosphere that "you could cut it with a knife," and although the phrase lacked originality it was nevertheless almost justifiable.

But for the mosquitoes and the occasional foot-fall of a sentry on the battlements, the silence remained unbroken until half-past ten. If there is one quality which, above all others, distinguishes a well-trained Frontier Force battalion, it is a remarkable spirit of imperturbability—a total absence of bustle and confusion when preparing for action. The motto of the *N*th Piffers, borne on a scroll beneath their crest, is neither Latin nor Norman-French: it is the Urdu word "*Taiyar*," which means "Ready!" and it goes without saying that he who is always ready has but little need of preparation. Details of the night's venture had long since been imparted to the men by their platoon commanders, ammunition had been distributed, water-bottles filled. They would march off at 11 p.m.? *Chhanga!* Then parade under section commanders at 10.45, under platoon commanders at 10.50; at 10.55 the Kapitán Sahib himself would appear and make a rapid inspection, and by one minute past eleven the guard would be

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

barring the gate behind the departing column.  
*Thik hoga? Bilkhul thik!*

Meanwhile, a little sleep. . . .

Shortly before eleven, Futter, who had been dozing over his table in the signal-office, became aware of Captain Wise standing in the doorway. He wore web equipment over his khaki shirt and shorts, and his head was swathed in a khaki turban, tied Sikh-fashion. (One disadvantage of being a British Officer in the Indian Army is that you are so easily distinguishable from your men, and unless you wish to draw more than your fair share of the enemy's fire it is generally advisable to discard your helmet in favour of native head-dress.)

Futter blinked at the apparition and started to rise, but Wise waved him back to his seat.

"Sit down, laddie, sit down!" he said, with a grin. "I've only popped in to say we're off. No luck with the line, I suppose?"

Futter consulted both key and test-panel. "Not a 'ope, sir," he reported, as the needle swung over.

"Well, well, it can't be helped. Still, give it a trial every now and then, won't you? Here's the message I want sent if you get through, and you can tell them anything else they want to know as well. Oh, and I'm partly taking your advice about the prisoner, Futter—that is to say, he's not coming with us, so you needn't be afraid of him knifing me in the dark! At the same time I can't decently keep him locked up

## *Lean Brown Men*

here all night against his will ; accordingly, when we've been gone an hour—that is, at midnight—Subadar Hari Singh will offer him his freedom, though he needn't turn out at that time of night unless he particularly wants to. Anyway, by then it will be too late for him to do the dirty on us, and I really don't care a hoot whether he goes or stays."

Futter clicked his tongue and nodded approvingly. "That's the stuff, sir!" he ventured.

"Well, that's about all, I think," Wise resumed, looking at his watch. "And now I must be getting along. Keep awake all you can, and then you can sleep the whole day to-morrow if you want to. By the way, I'd appreciate a cup of tea when I get back, so you might have a kettle boiling from four a.m. onwards. Anything else?"

"Don't think so, sir; except—good luck, sir!"

"Thanks. It'll be a grand show if we bag Tura Baz, but, of course, there's no telling what may not go wrong in the dark. Well, bye-bye for the present, Futter."

"Cheerio, sir—take care o' yourself, beg pardon, sir!"

Wise laughed and strode out into the darkness. Five minutes later Futter heard the column depart and the great north gate being bolted behind it.

Futter threw himself on his bed and let his

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

mind wander. . . . Nice cove, Ole Wizzy, when you got to know him. . . . Matey like, without forgetting he was an officer, and not above taking a tip from a signalman, as he'd done about this nig. Not all 'oney being an officer, per'aps—all right in orn'ary times, drawing 'undreds of rupees a month for sitting on your backside while other people did the work, but when it came to a show like this you 'ad the 'ell of a responsibility.

He tried to put himself in his superior's place, and wondered what he'd have done in similar circumstances : would he have had the "guts" to make the same decision as Wise had made—to leave his fort nearly empty and march off into the darkness in an endeavour to get the better of a couple of hundred blood-thirsty tribesmen, without so much as a "by your leave" to the Brigadier?

No, he wouldn't; he had to admit that to himself. But why not? Weren't all men equal when you got down to brass tacks? Was "Wizzy" a better man than himself just because he had plenty of money and a college education? Blimey, no! Such a thought was rank heresy, and utterly opposed to the first principles of the socialistic creed to which he nominally subscribed. His proletarian gorge tried to rise as he told himself that Wise was only doing what he was paid to do. But somehow the argument failed to carry conviction. There must be something more to it than that.

## *Lean Brown Men*

Futter suddenly realized that now was his chance to have a sniff round Wise's room, a thing he had been longing to do for the past fortnight. A lamp was still burning dimly there, but he armed himself with his electric torch as well. The result of his inquisition was disappointing in the extreme, for there was little of interest lying about, and the officer's attaché-case was securely locked. He examined the titles of two or three books, but decided that they were high-brow and dull. He helped himself to a handful of cigarettes from the tin which he found on a shelf, and then he caught sight of the two letters lying on the table. Futter quizzed the inscriptions by the light of his torch. One was addressed to Vice-Admiral Sir Adrian Wise, K.C.M.G., c/o the Mediterranean Fleet; the other—a thickish one—to a Miss Sheila Darell in Khanzai.

The signalman drew in his breath with a quick hiss as he read the latter. . . . Ho! So Ole Wizzy was sweet on 'er, was 'e? 'Struth, that was that dark-'aired peach he'd seen knocking about in Khanzai lately: the Brigade-Major's sister, so he'd heard. Pretty as a picture, she was—the sort of skirt you dreamed about, when you was lucky. . . . Blimey, yes: and she was the young lady what'd spoke friendly and given him a bottle of beer that night, a few weeks back, when he'd had to deliver a message at the Brigade-Major's bungalow. . . . A real lady, she was, just as Ole Wizzy was a real gent—and yet there weren't nothink 'aughty nor stuck-

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

up about neither of 'em. Coo, fancy 'er and Ole Wizzy, though. . . .

Futter hesitated, assailed by a great temptation, but at length he regretfully replaced the letter on the table and slouched back to his own room. There'd be 'ell to pay if Ole Wizzy came back safe and sound and found 'is letters 'ad been nosed into. . . .

Futter lay down on his bed again, and lit one of the cigarettes that he had "won." All he wanted now was a drink—none o' your lime-juice or any such gut-rot, but a real good peg of whisky or a bottle of beer ; something with a kick in it, any road !

And at that moment the devil sent past the door the khaki-clad figure of Sub-Assistant-Surgeon Gurnam Singh, who was the nearest approach to a medical officer that Fort Marjorie boasted. He had apparently been working late, probably preparing the sick-bay for the reception of casualties, for he was only just carrying his bedding up to the battlements, where he generally slept. Futter recognized him as he passed the open door, and a great new thought flashed through his mind—a thought which may be summarized in the two magic words, "Medical Comforts." He had seen those words painted on a *yakdan* which stood against the wall in the Medical Inspection Room, and experience taught him that they might embrace alcoholic stimulants. Worth looking into, any road, but he'd better make sure that Gurnam Singh had really gone to bed.



## *Lean Brown Men*

Having waited a minute or two, he strolled with well-assumed nonchalance out of his room, up the mud steps, and made a leisurely tour of the battlements. Passing the guard-room, he caught sight of the prisoner lying on his bed in the barred cell ; he appeared to be asleep, for Futter could see no movement as he peered through the bars. The cell was in darkness, except for a stray beam or two from the lantern which hung outside the guard-room door. Futter lingered a few moments, gazing at the caged Pathan with feelings similar to those which he had experienced years before when visiting the tiger-house at the Zoo. A pretty tough-looking devil—not the sort of blighter you'd want to bump into on a dark night ! Well, he'd be gone at midnight, unless he chose to stay in his cell. Futter hoped he would go, for it fair give him the creeps to have this savage-looking gink in the fort, even locked up.

With a little shudder he resumed his stroll. The previous day's guard had not been relieved, so that more fresh men should be available for the Majri expedition, and he met Havildar Ram Singh returning from a tour of his sentries. The signalman nodded affably and said " Salaam ! " but the havildar merely grunted and passed on. Surly ole airedale ! . . . On the eastern battlements he encountered Subadar Hari Singh pacing slowly to and fro. A little farther on he discovered the recumbent form of Gurnam Singh, already beginning to snore.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

Good enough !

Futter descended once more into the courtyard and rather ostentatiously entered his own quarters. He waited there a minute, and then slipped out again, and in stockinged feet crept along the veranda to the sick-bay. Would it be open? Yes, the door was ajar, and the room empty and in darkness. Cautiously he played his torch on the bottom of the far wall and found the *yakdan* that he was seeking. His heart sank as he saw that it was secured by an efficient-looking government padlock, and rose again as a flash of the torch revealed a bunch of keys hanging on a nail over the table.

With infinite care Futter explored the contents of the pannier. There was no whisky, but—almost as good—a newly-opened bottle of Three Star brandy. He pulled out the cork and swallowed a large swig of it, neat. Lumme, that was the stuff! Coo, it didn't 'alf touch the spot; not s'nice as whisky, per'aps, but better'n a sock on the mug with a wet 'addick. . . . Five times in all his lips closed round the neck of the bottle, until more than a third of its contents had been absorbed. Then, obeying a brilliant inspiration, he filled up the bottle to its original level from a jar of distilled water which stood on a shelf, replaced it in the *yakdan*, snapped the lock, hung the keys where he had found them, and stealthily returned to his own quarters.

VIII

Signalman Futter felt a trifle shaky on his feet as a result of his raid on the medical comforts, but the neat spirit quickly induced in him an unwonted clarity of intellect. The heat and discomfort of Fort Marjorie had dulled his never too bright wits during the past fortnight, but the brandy had the immediate effect of endowing him with a temporary gift of lucid thought such as he had rarely experienced before.

He had seated himself at the instrument-table and was idly amusing himself by pretending to transmit Wise's message on the useless sounder, when the first brain-wave came to him. Phew, what an adjectival fool he'd been! What the adjectival blazes was the use of adverbially well sitting there waiting for the adjectived sounder to come through? Linemen don't carry sounder sets about with them: they use buzzer-telephones, and unless he connected a similar instrument to his end of the line, how the adjectival aforesaid could they get through to him? Of course, once the fault was cleared properly he'd be able to use sounder again to Khanzai, but he ought to have the buzzer on too, for the lineman's benefit.

Coo, just as well he'd remembered, even now; the sergeant wouldn't 'alf crack on if 'e knew, stuffy ole airedale!

Futter quickly retrieved an ancient but serviceable D III telephone from a pile of oddments at

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

the rear of the office, and connected it "in parallel" with his telegraph circuit. He put on the earphones and buzzed a tentative call. No reply. There was hardly likely to be a lineman out at this time of night, but there it was, ready for the morning. . . .

And now what to do? He felt too exhilarated to sleep, and besides, Ole Wizzy had asked him to keep awake as much as possible. Good Ole Wizzy—what would *he* be doing now?

Futter glanced at his watch and noted with surprise that it was barely half-past eleven. They wouldn't have got far in half an hour on a dark night like this; not half-way to Majri yet, probably. Good Ole Wizzy! Nice bloke really, and he'd got guts. It needed guts to go snooping round Retistan at this time of night, with Tura Baz's gang in the offing, but it was no good trying to be an officer if you shirked things. No, it wasn't all 'oney being an officer—specially in the Indian Army, where you spent half your life alone with a lot of nigs. Look what had happened to the previous Commandant: and Futter shuddered again as he called to mind the dreadful sights that had met his eyes when he had strayed by accident into that room in the north-east bastion the day they had arrived. He had never been near it since, and Wise and his Sikhs seemed to shun it too. Ugh!

Try as he might, Futter could not erase the memory of that room from his mind. He cursed himself for having let his thoughts stray in that

## *Lean Brown Men*

direction again, but cursing did no good, and the vision persisted. He attempted to finish his oft-interrupted letter to Auntie ; he even fetched one of Wise's books and tried to read it, but all to no purpose. The brandy had put his eyes out of focus, and was inflaming his mind as well. His head seemed to be swelling ; and then, on the crest of a wave of drink-begotten ecstasy, there arrived his second brain-wave—an idea at once so brilliant and so terrifying that he almost cried out at it. In spite of the sweltering heat he shivered as if with cold, while the perspiration ran down his forehead and dripped on the table. He endeavoured to fight against it, but he knew from the start that the odds were too heavy. A grim and dreadful force seemed to be at work, drawing him to that shambles in the bastion as a magnet draws iron. He, Albert George Futter, must go there now—at once—and gaze again on the horrors that he longed to forget !

And then of a sudden his sturdy little Cockney soul soared triumphant over his agony of mind, and a new spirit entered into him. 'Struth, who said he was afraid to go into that room ? Afraid ? 'Im ? No. 230719 Signalmán Futter, A.G., *afraid* ? Did anyone dare to suggest that he lacked guts—that, if Ole Wizzy and his curly-beavered Sikhs could go out and meet their living enemies in the dark, he—Albert Futter—was scared of venturing alone into an empty room ? Coo, he'd show 'em ! Where the 'ell was that blarsted torch ?

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

Futter was not drunk, but he was certainly in that condition which a warrior of old defined as "indifferent sober." Nevertheless, he found his torch and managed to steer a fairly straight course across the courtyard. The night was clearer now, and a million stars shed a faint light over the silent fort. He climbed manfully up the three or four steps which led to the raised veranda of the officers' quarters, and found himself facing the door of what had been the mess-room. Squaring his jaw, he turned the handle and entered.

Once inside, the last vestige of his fear vanished as if by magic, and he wanted to kick himself for having been the victim of such an absurd panic. What on earth was there to be scared of, after all? He played his torch boldly on every inch of the room, and a great pity took the place of fear as the rays lingered over the sinister patches which had once been pools of blood. The austere-looking government furniture was all in disorder too—chairs with splintered legs, tables overturned, pictures riddled with bullets, broken glass and crockery littering the floor. The late Commandant and the Treasury Officer must have put up a great fight, Futter reflected; nothing else could account for such scenes of chaos. But then at last they had been overpowered and—and—Pathans take their time over killing wounded captives. Ah, Gawd. . . .

Another door led from the mess-room into the sleeping quarters. On his previous visit Futter

## *Lean Brown Men*

had not paused to explore this, but now curiosity, coupled with pride in his new-found courage, prompted him to pick his way through the débris and penetrate into the inner room.

This, by comparison, was in a fairly orderly condition. True, the mutineers had cleared it of everything that might be of use to themselves ; the two iron bedsteads were devoid of even a mattress, and only the tattered grass matting covered the floor. As Futter shone his torch round the room, something bright reflected its light from under a far corner of the matting. He walked across to investigate, and found to his surprise that it was a silver rupee.

Stooping to pick it up, the signalman noticed that the mud floor underneath was strangely uneven and showed signs of having been disturbed. His naturally inquisitive mind made him pull back the matting a couple of feet, and what he saw made his heart miss a beat, for not even a child could have mistaken its significance. The floor had, in comparatively recent times, been dug up over a roughly rectangular area of perhaps three feet by two. The slight unevenness of its surface showed clearly that something had been buried there ; was still buried there !

Three minutes later Futter, with the aid of his fingers and jack-knife, had unearthed the top of an oblong steel box. Its lock was broken and useless, and although the box was too heavy to lift he had no difficulty in raising the lid and peeping inside.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

Even as he worked the truth had been slowly dawning on him, but a single glance at the contents of the box drew from him a long, low, excited whistle. He had found the missing treasure-chest, and it was full to the brim with little sacks of silver coins and neat bundles of notes.

In the ordinary sense of the term it would be an exaggeration to describe Albert Futter as an honest man. If, for example, he had found any loose money lying about in Wise's room, it is highly probable that he would have helped himself to a safe proportion of it, just as he had every intention of keeping the rupee which had led to the discovery of the treasure-chest. Yet it is only just to record that now, with all this wealth spread out before his eyes, no thought of converting it to his own use entered his mind.

Truth to tell, his brain was busy with a totally different problem—a problem quite unconnected, for once, with his own affairs. Futter was no reasoner, but for the third time that night inspiration was upon him, and a jumble of apparently disconnected facts were uniting to form a coherent and logical whole. When the process was complete, Futter found himself in possession of a Theory—a Theory which appeared so perfect and unassailable as to have the force of a proved and tested certainty. It not only fitted all the known facts, but explained them,



## *Lean Brown Men*

and revealed their significance and interdependence.

First of all, who had buried the treasure-chest in this room : the mutineers or their victims ? Obviously the former, as the broken lock bore witness. But why, then, had the murderers buried the box in the fort instead of carrying it away with them ? Either because its existence was known only to certain ringleaders, who wished to avoid having to share its contents with too many of their followers ; or, more likely, because the Brigadier's swift despatch of the cavalry had taken them by surprise and they had had to leave it behind owing to its weight, hoping for a chance to recover it later.

Either of these hypotheses being adopted, why should Tura Baz now choose to attack Majri village rather than the fort ? Answer : *he wouldn't*, except as a ruse to lure away the greater part of the garrison ! But would Captain Wise, or any other officer, leave his fort in the middle of the night just because a raid appeared to be in progress on Majri village ? Certainly not : the bait must be more tempting than that.

What bait, then ? Why, obviously the prospect of capturing Tura Baz himself ; that alone would induce the Commandant to undertake a midnight expedition.

But how to display this bait—to make Wise believe that Tura Baz would be at Majri that night, and to suggest the possibility of capturing him ?

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

Answer : an emissary must be sent to the fort, to tell some such tale as that which Adam Khan had told that afternoon !

But even if Wise believed the story and swallowed the bait, would he take the responsibility of making the attempt without permission from headquarters ?

Answer : not if he were in a position to seek such permission. But if his communications with Khanzai were cut he would probably act on his own initiative.

But if the telegraph line were cut, surely the garrison would smell a rat ?

Undoubtedly ; and therefore the fault must be made to appear accidental. There were plenty of ex-signallers amongst the mutineers capable of faking an earth-fault.

So far, so good. But now, supposing that Wise sallied forth from Fort Marjorie with the object of capturing Tura Baz, and by accident or superior strategy succeeded in doing so ; dare Tura Baz risk such a calamity ? Of course not ! Tura Baz wouldn't be within a mile of the village that night, though some of his men might be. Where would he be, then ? Somewhere in the offing, surely, with a prize of twenty thousand rupees at stake ?

And even as this last question proposed itself to Futter's mind, the answer came in a flash : Tura Baz would be at the post of greatest danger, playing a lone hand rather than leading his men to battle, undertaking the task which he

## *Lean Brown Men*

dared not entrust to any other, for fear of treachery. He himself would go to Fort Marjorie, posing as his own enemy, and would enjoy the exquisite pleasure of laying an information against himself.

That, surely, was the final solution to all these conundrums : *Adam Khan and Tura Baz were one and the same man !*

The chain of reasoning might, to an expert, display a doubtful link here and there, but Futter was no logician, and no sooner did the explanation dawn on him that he instinctively accepted it as true. Adam Khan was Tura Baz, or Tura Baz was Adam Khan—whichever way round you cared to look at it. The simple audacity of the thing took his breath away and left him gasping. What the next move in the game would be he could not even guess ; all he knew was that Ole Wizzy had been decoyed away on a wild-goose chase after the very man who was sitting all the time in a cell in Fort Marjorie.

At this point a cold fear clutched Futter's heart. He pulled his watch from his pocket and examined it with his torch. Three minutes to twelve, by cripes ! Phew ! Just in time to prevent an even greater blunder than Wise's departure. In three minutes they'd be releasing this devil, Tura Baz—letting him slip through their fingers to carry out the next part of his crafty programme, whatever it might be. Could he ever make Hari Singh understand—convince him of the truth ? He must, he must, he *must* !

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

Stumbling blindly over the débris in the mess-room, Futter reached the open door and flung himself down the steps to the courtyard.

"Oy, Subberdar Sa'b! Subberdar Sa'b 'Arry Singh! Where the 'ell are yer? *Kidhar hai?* Come 'ere, *jildi*, can't yer?"

"*Bahut achchha, sahib.* Me coming," came the Subadar's voice from above; and the speaker hurried down the mud stairs to investigate the cause of the disturbance.

## IX

It was fully an hour after midnight when the Brigadier, trotting gingerly over the rough track a couple of hundred yards in advance of the Lancers, drew level with the rearmost camel of the ration convoy. He made himself known to the astonished Rajput havildar in charge of the rear party, and then cantered past the long string of camels to the head of the column, where the subaltern commanding the escort was riding drowsily in front of his slow-moving charge.

"That you, Marriott?" called the Brigadier, reining in his pony.

"Good Lord, it's the Brigadier!" exclaimed Marriott incredulously, peering through the gloom. "Heavens above, sir, what on earth are you doing here—night operations?"

The Brigadier grunted. "Call it that if you like," he replied. "I've got Mayes-Gilbert's

## *Lean Brown Men*

squadron half a mile behind, and we'll probably be—er—operating in the fairly near future."

"Why, anything wrong, sir?"

"Wrong? Devil fly away with me if I know, Marriott," was the response. "All I know is that the Fort Marjorie line has been out of action since this afternoon, and I don't like it. You've seen nothing wrong, I suppose?"

"Nothing, sir," answered the subaltern, "though, of course, I haven't been looking for faults, and it's been plaguey dark."

"Quite," agreed the Brigadier shortly. "Well, look here, Marriott, I think you'd better halt your convoy and let us get ahead. How far do you reckon we are from Marjorie now?"

"Six or seven miles, sir. We're a bit behind time, as a matter of fact, owing to camels throwing their loads, and so forth."

"Just as well, perhaps. You'd better not approach Fort Marjorie till it's broad daylight, me lad, and even then you'd better reconnoitre well ahead before coming too close. Between ourselves, I've a hunch that Tura Baz is knocking about, and I don't want you to get mixed up with him. So halt for an hour here and then come on slowly. All right?"

"Right, sir!" Marriott broke off as the sound of galloping hooves approached through the darkness.

"Who's that?" cried the Brigadier, as the rider came up.

"It's me, sir—Mayes-Gilbert," was the reply.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

"The lineman has found the fault, and I thought you'd better see it before it's cleared. I'm afraid there's nothing accidental about it, sir."

"The devil!" exclaimed the Brigadier; and without further questioning he followed the squadron commander back along the column. A quarter of a mile to the rear they found Signalman Abbott, the lineman, flashing his torch up and down a galvanized-iron pole.

The Brigadier whistled as he made a rapid inspection. He was no electrician, but it needed no high degree of technical knowledge to appreciate the situation. A long strand of copper wire had been thrown over the telegraph line at the top of the pole, looped neatly round it, and the ends twisted round and round the iron pole, thus providing the current with an easy escape to earth. And Mayes-Gilbert had been right: there was not the least possibility of an accident. On the contrary, it was patently the work of a skilled man, who knew what he was about.

"Clear it, lineman!" muttered the Brigadier softly. Abbott quickly cut the ends of the copper wire with his pliers, and connected one to each terminal of his portable telephone. Then he buzzed rapidly, *MJR—MJR—MJR*. But there was no reply.

"Connection's none too good, sir," he suggested, when at last he abandoned the effort, "and, of course, Futter—that's our chap at Marjorie, sir—may be asleep, or may have for-

## *Lean Brown Men*

gotten to connect up for buzzer working. It's the sort of thing he would do."

"H'm. Thanks for trying to comfort me, Abbott," said the Brigadier, with a short laugh, "and I only hope the explanation is as harmless as you suggest. Personally, I'm devilish uneasy about everything. You say the connection's bad here: where's the next proper test-point, or whatever you call it?"

"About two or three miles ahead, from what I remember, sir," replied the lineman.

"Right! Well, let's get there, chaps, as quick as we can.—Come on, Gilbert, we must bustle. I suppose we daren't try a gallop over this ghastly country?"

"Not unless you want a fine crop of broken fetlocks and collar-bones, sir," said the squadron commander. "But I fancy the going's a bit easier from here onwards, so we might trot out a bit."

"Right-ho! Come along, then.—Abbot, keep your eyes skinned for that test-point, and sing out as soon as you spot it."

So saying, the Brigadier wheeled his charger and, followed by the Lancers, rode westward as rapidly as he dared.

\* \* \*

The departure from Fort Marjorie of Adrian Wise and his hundred Sikhs had been quiet and unostentatious to a degree, yet it had, nevertheless, been watched by four pairs of keen black eyes from a distance of less than fifty yards.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

At right-angles to the deep nullah by which Adam Khan had approached the fort that afternoon there ran a second and smaller gully, and ever since darkness had fallen these four warriors of the Raghza Khel had kept unremitting watch on the fort. Very still they lay, for, although the night was dark, there was danger in making the slightest movement that might attract the attention of the sentries on the battlements.

As the last "section of fours" wheeled out of the fort and the gate swung to behind them, one of the watchers, a lean greybeard with shifty eyes, made an almost imperceptible movement with his head and, followed by his companions, glided silently away towards the north-west. A couple of hundred yards farther on he halted, and the four men lay flat on the ground, their heads almost touching. The greybeard wasted no time in preliminaries.

"Zar Gul," he whispered huskily to the youth on his right, "you will go carefully round the fort on the western side, keeping at least five hundred paces distant and treading silently till you are out of earshot. Then you will run swiftly to the south, to the spot where we left the *lashkar*. Seek out Mir Akbar, and tell him that the white man and a full hundred of the Khalsa have quitted the fort as we foresaw. They are heading for Majri, *but Tura Baz is not with them*. Is it clear?"

Zar Gul nodded.

"Say also," continued the veteran leader,



## *Lean Brown Men*

“that I am sending word by Makhmad Gul to Sahib Din, who commands the ambush at the *kotal*, while Ali Khan and I remain here to do our part. Let him act in accordance with the instructions which Tura Baz entrusted to him, and say that I will meet him at the appointed place before moonrise. Is all understood?”

“It is understood, Yaqub,” breathed Zar Gul; and he repeated his message slowly and deliberately. Then, having received an approving nod from the greybeard, he silently disappeared into the darkness.

Yaqub, with equal care and deliberation, then imparted a somewhat similar message to another of his henchmen, to be carried in another direction. A minute later this second emissary had sped upon his errand, whereupon Yaqub and his remaining companion cautiously wormed their way round from the north side of the fort to the south.

In less than ten minutes they had arrived at a little fold in the ground a hundred and fifty yards or so from the south gate. Here they lay flat upon the ground again, and further whispered instructions passed. Their recipient was one Ali Khan, a lad barely sixteen years of age, though by Western standards he looked somewhat older. A handsome, well-built youth, he was the protégé and special favourite of Tura Baz himself, who had personally detailed him for his present delicate task.

The brief consultation over, Ali Khan noise-

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

lessly divested himself of every stitch of clothing, except a pair of dark woollen socks. Yaqub, meanwhile, had taken from inside his turban a square of black cloth, in which he proceeded to wrap up a short, broad-bladed knife and a couple of files. The slender parcel was secured with string and handed to the waiting boy. Then Ali Khan stood upright for a moment, quickly took his bearings, and disappeared into the night so silently that his companion scarcely saw him go.

Five minutes later the boy was lying flat on his face against the wall of the fort, a little to the west of the gate. His naked body was cut and bleeding in several places as a result of his crawl over the stony ground, but he paid no heed to his hurts.

Having rested awhile and regained his breath, Ali Khan cautiously raised his head and peered into the gloom. It was still very dark, but in a moment his keen young eyes discerned what they were seeking. A few yards ahead of him something dark and narrow was hanging against the wall. Inch by inch he crept towards it, till he could touch it with his hand. It was a blue turban-cloth, and one that he knew as well as his own.

Very gently Ali Khan took hold of it and gave it a little jerk. Almost simultaneously a similar tug from above answered him. Rising warily to a kneeling position, the boy tied up in the end of the turban the little black parcel which Yaqub had given him. He knotted it

## *Lean Brown Men*

securely, and when he was satisfied that it could not fall out he gave three deliberate jerks on the cloth. Without delay it was drawn slowly upwards, a few inches at a time, until it had disappeared from view. But still Ali Kahn made no move. Patiently he knelt there with upturned face, until he saw something small and white fluttering down towards him. It landed some yards away, and he stealthily crept forward and recovered it. It was a flimsy scrap of rice-paper, stamped on one side with the name of a well-known brand of cigarettes. On the other, rudely drawn with a charred match, was a simple geometrical figure—a circle cut by a secant.

In the dim starlight Ali Khan just managed to make it out, and he nodded understandingly to himself. He could neither read nor write, but, in the circumstances, the diagram could have but one meaning : moonrise !

Then he started to crawl back to Yaqub.

## X

Not least among the many mysteries attaching to India is Private Thomas Atkins's phenomenal knack of conversing with his native brethren. Not one soldier in a thousand ever troubles to learn the language properly, yet within a remarkably short time of his arrival in the country Thomas has acquired a simple repertoire of

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

words and phrases which, while they offend against every canon of grammar, pronunciation, and polite usage, nevertheless appear to suffice for all his needs.

Futter's vocabulary consisted of perhaps a couple of dozen assorted imperatives, mostly connected with the satisfaction of his bodily appetites, plus a choice selection of utterly unspeakable oaths and terms of abuse, which, if used by one Indian to another, must inevitably lead to drawn knives or broken pates, but which the British soldier seems privileged to employ with impunity. Futter was also a firm believer in the fine old English doctrine that all "foreigners" are stone-deaf, and that additional intelligibility may best be gained by shouting.

Subadar Hari Singh, for his part, made no pretence of being an English scholar. All his service had been spent in the 14th Piffers, under officers who spoke his own tongue fluently and idiomatically, and he had found no need for extraneous linguistic study. At the same time, it is almost impossible to serve the Government for nearly thirty years without picking up a few words here and there, and, all things considered, it is probable that Hari Singh's knowledge of English was at least equal to Futter's of Hindustani—minus the more lurid swear-words.

Be that as it may, the remarkable fact remains that in a very short space of time the signalman had succeeded in transferring the essential points of his theory from his own mind to that of the

## *Lean Brown Men*

Subadar. The latter was at first incredulous and suspicious, for Futter's breath smelled strongly of brandy and he appeared to be even more "under the influence" than he really was. But the sight of the treasure-chest immediately drove all such thoughts from the Subadar's mind, and he listened gravely and attentively to Futter's thesis. Incredulity momentarily returned when the sensational theory as to the prisoner's identity was advanced, but this quickly gave place to a mental admission that the seemingly wild conjecture might not, after all, be impossibly far-fetched.

Had he been lacking in initiative and responsibility, Hari Singh would never have risen from the ranks to become senior subadar of the *Nth* Piffers. Actually, he possessed both these qualities to an unusual degree, and in the present case his mind was soon made up. Adam Khan might or might not be Tura Baz, but it was quite clear that if the treasure-chest had been discovered earlier in the day it would certainly have influenced Wise Sahib's reception of the Pathan's story. In the new circumstances Hari Singh felt fully justified in using his own discretion with regard to releasing or retaining the prisoner. On his own responsibility he would suspend the offer of release, and Adam Khan would remain in his cell till Wise Sahib returned, whether he liked it or not!

The Subadar glanced at his watch by the light of Futter's torch and saw that it was already nearly half-past twelve. Briefly, and in a ludi-

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

crous mixture of languages, he announced his decision to the anxious signalman, whom he further requested to remain on guard over the treasure until a proper sentry could be posted. Then he set out to interview the Pathan.

The prisoner appeared to be asleep when the Subadar reached his cell. At any rate he was on his bed, lying with his face turned away from the door. But the Raghza Khel are light sleepers, and Adam Khan seemed to sense the old Sikh's presence even before he heard his voice. He turned his head, and recognizing his visitor, slid lightly off the bed and came to the grille.

No ambassador from the Court of St. James could have conveyed an unpleasant message to a foreign power with greater courtesy and tact than Hari Singh displayed on this occasion. In all this troubled world there is no more heart-felt racial enmity than that which exists between Sikh and Pathan, yet neither in Hari Singh's soft-spoken announcement nor in the Pathan's dignified reception of it was any trace of animosity discernible. The Subadar, for his part, diplomatically avoided giving any reason for the change of plan; still less did he say a word from which the prisoner might deduce that his identity was under suspicion. "Circumstances had arisen. . . ." Just that, and no more. And the Pathan, in his turn, accepted the verdict with a proudly careless shrug of the shoulders. His protest, when at length he voiced it, was as

## *Lean Brown Men*

quiet and decorous as Hari Singh's decree had been, and he appeared to register it more as a matter of form than from any other motive. The Subadar heard him out in silence ; when it was finished, he shook his head and reiterated his regrets with a suave politeness which sounded almost sincere. Then, like a couple of hardened diplomats, they bowed very slightly to each other, and Hari Singh walked away, his mind already intent on other matters.

He had a great deal to think about. His interview with "Adam Khan" had somehow lent colour to Futter's fantastic theory, for there was a regal dignity about this captive which seemed to tally with the story of Tura Baz's origin. If, then, this man were Tura Baz, what was he doing in Fort Marjorie? He had, indeed, succeeded in ridding the fort of its commandant and five-sixths of its garrison, but for what purpose? And now the missing treasure-chest had been unearthed : was *that* the objective? What was to happen next? Would the Raghza Khel attack the fort? A mad venture, if that were the plan ; for, even with less than thirty rifles to defend it, the place must be impregnable to an enemy without artillery or scaling-ladders.

Had Wise Sahib walked into a trap at Majri? No ; Wise Sahib was not the man to be ensnared so easily. A trap might very possibly have been set, but the Kapitán Sahib was no fool. Before leaving, he had told Hari Singh in so many words

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

that he had no intention of going near the *kotal* recommended by Adam Khan. But, in any case, it was hopeless to worry about Wise Sahib now ; no runner could find him in the dark, and he was quite capable of looking after himself. As for the possibility of the fort being attacked—well, the idea seemed preposterous, but it would be madness to neglect any precaution. The sentries must be doubled without delay, even though this meant employing every sepoy left in the fort.

The prisoner, meanwhile, had turned away from the door of his cell and thrown himself on the bed again. For the first time since his incarceration he permitted himself a smile, which was almost a grin, and for a few moments his body shook with silent laughter. All his life he had been a lucky man, and his luck was not deserting him in this latest venture, it seemed. For the past four hours he had been wondering how best to decline the offer of release when it should be made, without arousing suspicion—and now the unwanted offer had been miraculously withdrawn ! He had taken a big risk in offering to guide Wise to the *kotal*, and again in demanding his release when the Commandant had declined that offer ; but his bluff had worked and his gamble was justified. Needless to say, he had already arranged alternative plans of campaign for use in case things had turned out



## *Lean Brown Men*

otherwise, but this latest stroke of good fortune left the way clear for the scheme he fancied most.

With a little sigh of contentment Tura Baz (for it was he) turned over on to his left side again, and with his right hand groped on the floor between his bed and the wall for the slender black parcel which he had drawn up through the cell's tiny window a few minutes before Hari Singh's visit. He cautiously untied the string and examined the contents. The two files he rejected as useless, for, although the bars of his cell were old and rusted, the guardroom was too close at hand for him to risk using them. He stowed them away under his pillow and turned his attention to the knife. It was a sturdy little weapon, shaped like a skean-dhu, and its blade bore the trade-mark of a famous Sheffield firm.

Lying apparently motionless on his side, Tura Baz set about his task. He reckoned that he had the best part of two hours in which to cut a hole in the mud wall large enough for him to squeeze his way out on to the battlements when the time came. It was a ticklish job, requiring the maximum of care and the minimum of noise. The plastered mud must be dug out a fragment at a time, and he must be careful not to pierce the outer shell of the wall until he was ready to emerge, lest a passing sentry should notice the hole and give the alarm. It was a task which very few Europeans would have cared to under-

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

take, but it presented little difficulty to Tura Baz. He was a Pathan, and they still tell the story on the frontier of how a certain British officer, sleeping one night in his bedroom, was visited by Pathan thieves, who not only stole every movable article in the room, but even removed the pyjamas from his sleeping body without awakening him.

Once or twice he rested, and ostentatiously smoked a cigarette near the door of his cell to impress the guard with his innocent idleness. His keen eyes were quick to note that there were no longer any Sikhs asleep on the battlements, and that the number of sentries had been more than doubled. Had the garrison got wind, then, of anything amiss? The idea did not disturb him unduly, for his plans had been carefully made and he had absolute faith in them.

By two o'clock he had excavated a cavity some two feet square, and there remained only a flimsy shell of mud-plaster between himself and the battlements. Having stealthily deposited the rubble to one side of the gap so that it should not obstruct his passage, he lit yet another cigarette and took his ease until the moon should rise.

## XI

To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction, and when Futter had handed over the

## *Lean Brown Men*

custody of the treasure-chest to a Sikh sentry and slouched across to his own quarters, his brief but fruitful spell of mental brilliance was fast giving way to an overpowering desire for sleep. His brain was growing numb, and life seemed shadowy and unreal. He was vaguely aware that he had done good work in the past hour or so, and that if he didn't feel so "perishing" tired he'd be rather pleased with himself. But no man born of woman can drink two-thirds of a pint of neat brandy, with the thermometer still hovering in the neighbourhood of 100°, without feeling the effects. Futter was feeling them badly.

The Subadar had delayed sending a Sikh to relieve him until after he had completed his interview with the prisoner, and it was now after one o'clock. Futter dropped wearily on to his bed, passed a hand across his throbbing forehead, and tried to think. He kept on trying to decide how this latest development would affect matters in general; ought not something to be done about warning Ole Wizzy, for instance? But on that point he came to precisely the same conclusion as Hari Singh: namely, that Ole Wizzy was quite capable of looking after himself. He was not the man to walk unwarily in the dark, and if it came to a scrap he and his hundred Sikhs would "put it across" the raiders with consummate ease. Good Ole Wizzy! No adjectival flies on 'im!

And Signalman Futter fell asleep.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

It was a troubled, uneasy sleep, punctuated by absurdly distorted dreams. At first they were formless and lacking in coherence, but after an hour or so he found himself back at Sardhana in the United Provinces, having cycled out there from Meerut. Once again he was being conducted round the quaint old Franciscan church there by a white-bearded friar—a rum ole cuss, who didn't seem 'alf a bad sort, in spite of all the yarns you 'eard about monks and such-like. . . . Futter knew that he had been there before, for he remembered that there was a big hornets' nest on the roof of one of the verandas, and he asked his guide to show him the spot again. The old friar smilingly beckoned to him to follow, but now his venerable beard, instead of falling fanwise almost to his waist, was curled up round his chin like a Sikh's. . . . Blimey, it wasn't ole Father Anthony after all—it was Subberdar 'Arry Singh! . . . Coo, fancy 'im turning Carth'lic and shutting hisself up in a mouldy place like this! . . .

He followed the burly grey-clad figure out of a door into the blinding sunlight. Yes, there was the ole 'ornets' nest, right enough; bigger'n ever, it looked, and the 'ornets didn't 'alf buzz, neither! . . . Cripes, 'ark at 'em—buzzing away in chorus, all together, like. . . .

BUZZ-BUZZ (*pause*); BUB-BUZZ-BUZZ-BUZZ (*pause*); BUB-BUZZ-BER. . . .

Coo, it sounded almost like Morse they was sending—you could well-nigh read it and make

## *Lean Brown Men*

sense of it : BUZZ-BUZZ ; BUB-BUZZ-BUZZ-BUZZ ;  
BUB-BUZZ-BER. . . .

*MJR—MJR. . . .*

*'Struth !*

Futter catapulted himself off his bed and ran to the instrument-table. 'Ornets be sugared !—it was the D III that was buzzing—MJR—MJR. He snatched up the hand-set and pressed the buzzer key. Then he heard a voice—a distant, metallic kind of voice—calling his name. Strike 'im pink, if it wasn't ole Bill Abbott, the lineman ! . . . And then another voice, crisp and authoritative—an officer's voice, easier to hear ; a voice which asked for Captain Wise, and which interrupted his confused recital of events with frequent exhortations to the devil to fly away with all and sundry.

In two minutes Futter had placed the Brigadier in possession of a rough but tolerably accurate account of the state of affairs. He read out the message which Wise had left, and added an account of his discovery of the treasure-chest and the consequent retention of the prisoner. He even ventured to submit his theory as to the latter's identity. The Brigadier varied his invocations to the Evil One with a few searching questions, easy enough to answer. Then came a brief pause, during which Futter heard a low-voiced discussion taking place at the far end of the line. Then a couple of faint but distinct words of command—"Prepare to mount !"—"Mount !" And then the Brigadier's voice again.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

"Are you still there, Futter? Well, listen carefully to what I say now, and pass it on to the Indian Officer at once. I may be wrong, but I believe you chaps are in for a spot of bother when the moon rises—which will be any moment now, for I can see the glow in the sky already. Now, there's devil a bit of need to get the wind up, Futter, me boy. We're less than two miles away from you, and the cavalry have moved off ahead, so they'll be with you in two flicks of a pig's tail. All you've got to do is to keep your gates locked, and tell the men to stay under cover. Let them not fire at anyone they can't see properly, or they'll be——"

*Crack!*

*Crack—CRACK!*

"My Gawd, they've started now, sir!" cried Futter into the 'phone. "Did you 'ear them shots?"

"Shots, eh? By the holy O, they're deuced punctual, then, for the rim of the moon's just in view. Well, cut along quickly and tell the Subadar what I say. *Jump to it, man, jump to it! —don't sit there saying 'Yes, sir!'*"

His heart thumping violently, Futter ran out of the signal-office. There was a regular fusillade in progress now. Although at the first shot every lamp on the battlements had been extinguished, he could hear that the attack seemed to be confined to the north side of the fort, and he could dimly see the shadowy figures of Sikhs

## *Lean Brown Men*

lining the battlements there. He ran straight across the courtyard and up the mud stairs. He picked out Hari Singh's broad figure and white beard, and panting a little from the excitement and exercise, poured out the Brigadier's message.

The Subadar received the news with a little grunt of surprise and satisfaction. This attack was puzzling him, for it seemed such a forlorn and hopeless undertaking—a sheer waste of ammunition. There *must* be some ulterior motive, some point that he had overlooked, because the Pathan rarely expends a single shot without good reason. But now, with a squadron of cavalry barely a mile away and the Brigadier himself hastening towards the scene, there was no need to worry. The Raghza Khel would pay dearly for their mad enterprise when the Lancers appeared unexpectedly in their rear. And Wise Sahib too—where was he, and what doing? There had so far been no sound of firing from the direction of Majri.

His message delivered, Futter peeped through a vacant loophole out into the night. The moon was already clear of the horizon, but the long shadow cast by the fort made it difficult to see anything to the north. Now and then the flash of a rifle blazed momentarily in the darkness but the first fury of the attack had died down, and the firing from both sides was growing desultory.

Futter had never been under fire before, and the sensation gave him a queer, uneasy thrill.

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

He was scared of being hit, yet he longed to get a rifle and put in a few shots himself. There was nothing for him to do in his own line of business, and perhaps it was up to him to lend the tiny garrison a hand. His rifle was down in the signal-office, along with the rest of his equipment.

Yes, he'd nip down and get it.

He ran lightly down the steps in his stockinged feet and headed for his own quarters. To reach them he had to pass diagonally across the dark and deserted courtyard, and when he had reached the centre of it he saw something which rooted him to the spot and brought his heart into his throat with a sickening jerk.

Directly facing him was the great south gate, standing at the far end of a kind of tunnel, or archway, of which the roof was formed by the battlements above. This gate was never used by the garrison, and the tunnel was never illuminated at night. But now, as he looked, he saw the inky darkness slowly giving way at one side to an ever-widening rectangle of bluish grey.

SOMEONE WAS OPENING THE GATE !

In a flash now he understood many things which had hitherto been mysterious to him. This seemingly senseless sniping from the north was nothing more than a ruse to attract the garrison to that side of the fort while Tura Baz, who had somehow escaped from his cell, opened the south gate to his friends. And the stratagem



## *Lean Brown Men*

was succeeding, too—the gate was nearly a foot open already, and in a moment or two the savage devils would be crowding inside. Crumbs, what was to be done? He must get that gate shut *pronto*—he, Albert George Futter! No use yelling to the Sikhs: it'd be too late by the time they grasped the situation, and his cries would only precipitate the inrush of Pathans. No, by Cripes, he'd got to do it himself—now!

With a little gulp of fear Futter ran forward and plunged into that dreadful tunnel.

For a second he could see nothing; then all at once he descried the tall form of Tura Baz in the darkness, stripped to the skin to render himself invisible. The Pathan swung round with a snarl as he heard his adversary's softly padding footsteps behind him. Futter heard him rasp out something in Pushtu—either an oath or a command to his followers outside—and was aware of a gleaming knife in his right hand. But the signalman in his panic heeded neither the man nor the knife. With an inspired cunning he pretended to swerve sharply to the right. Tura Baz aimed a vicious blow at him with the knife, but, quick as he was, Futter was quicker and changed direction so suddenly that for a fraction of a second the Pathan lost sight of him altogether. And in that wink of time Futter had slipped past to the left and hurled his body with all his force against the gate.

He was dimly aware of the presence of many men outside, even though he saw none. Fortune

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

had guided his hand right on to one of the great iron bolts, and he managed to shoot it home just as he felt the knife plunge into his back between the shoulder-blades.

Ah, Gawd, he was done now, but he'd give this blarsted murderer somethink to remember 'im by. Gathering every ounce of his rapidly-ebbing strength, he turned and threw himself at his enemy. Tura Baz stepped lightly back—but not quite soon enough, for Futter's clenched fist caught him full on the jaw and sent him sprawling. The signalman fell too, half on top of his opponent. Roaring like a wild beast, he wrested the bloody knife from the hand of the half-stunned Pathan and plunged it again and again into his throat and breast.

Then, with a cry of 'Oy, Subberdar Sa'b—*idhar a'o*, can't yer?' he lost consciousness.

The dawn had broken when Futter opened his eyes again, and even then it was some little time before he was fully aware of his surroundings. He felt terribly faint and weak, his head throbbed abominably, and the knife-wound in his back was devilish sore, though he was gratefully conscious that it had been dressed and bandaged. He noted with some surprise that he was lying on Wise's camp-bed in the room next to the signal-office, and that Sub-Assistant-Surgeon Gurnam Singh was bending over him, one hand on his pulse and the other holding a

## *Lean Brown Men*

glass half-full of a pale brown fluid. Seated on the foot of the bed was the Brigadier, his sweat-sodden shirt clinging to his body and a look of ill-concealed anxiety on his hard-bitten face. The door leading into the signal-office was open, and Futter could see a figure which seemed very familiar sitting at the instrument-table, tapping away on the sounder key with an almost professional dexterity. . . . Great snakes, if it wasn't Ole Wizzy! Cripes, fancy 'im knowing Morse, and never letting on!

Futter obediently took a sip of the brown liquid proffered to him. Brandy, by gee!—but it didn't seem to 'ave no taste to it, some'ow. Then he remembered the distilled water, and in spite of his weakness and splitting headache the poetic justice of the thing tickled him and made him want to laugh. But every movement was torture, so he made a wry face instead and addressed Gurnam Singh in a voice which he scarcely recognized as his own, so faint it was.

"'Ere, what the 'ell d'yer call this, babu?" he whispered indignantly.

"Sahib, no talk, please. This brandy—this good for sahib!"

"Brandy?" quoth Signalman Futter, with well-simulated surprise. "Brandy? Coo, it might 'ave been once, per'aps, but it tastes more like weak ditch-water now. Ain't you got nothink with a bit o' kick in it? I feels faint, I do."

"The devil!" broke in the Brigadier, fishing

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

in his hip-pocket and producing a small silver flask. "Here, let you try this, me boy, for sure it has a kick would stun a mule."

"But, sir, this is government brandy of A 1 quality and strength, no doubt——" Gurnam Singh was indignant.

"Garn! You've been watering it down, babu!" growled Futter, "or someone 'as, any road.—Thank'ee, sir, I don't mind if I do," he continued, accepting the Brigadier's flask. He took a long swig at it and smacked his lips appreciatively. Then, despite Gurnam Singh's protests, he drained the flask to the bottom, and handed it back to its owner.

"Thank'ee, sir—that's the stuff!" he said; and fell asleep.

## XII

One evening, about a week later, as Futter lay in his cot in the Khanzai Military Hospital, there was a commotion without and the Brigadier, clad in tennis-shirt and Jodhpur breeches, entered the ward. He nodded affably right and left to the patients as he passed them, but he made no pause until he reached Futter.

"Well, and how goes it, Corporal Futter?" he inquired, perching himself on the foot of the bed and holding out his cigarette-case. "Sitting up and taking nourishment, what?"

"Thank you, sir, I'm none so bad," responded

## *Lean Brown Men*

Futter, helping himself to a fat Turkish. He paused while his visitor supplied a match, and then added, "Beg pardon, sir—I'm a signalman, not a corporal."

"Oh, yes, you are!" said the Brigadier. "The order came through this morning, and I may say I'd have raised Cain if it hadn't, dash it! Congratulations, Corporal Futter!" And he held out his hand.

"'Struth!" exclaimed Futter, his eyes protruding with amazement. "Is that straight, sir? Me a lance-corporal?"

"Lance be damned!" replied the Brigadier, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Full corporal, me boy, and antedated to take effect from a week ago. What's more, I gather the Viceroy himself made the suggestion, and the order certainly comes direct from the Commander-in-Chief."

"'Struth!" hissed Futter again. "Me a corporal? What-o—beg pardon, sir, but it don't seem 'ardly natural, some'ow."

"Well, there it is," continued the Brigadier, "and I'm sure you'll make a devilish good corporal too, incidentally. A very smart piece of work on your part, Futter, and we're all dashed proud of you. And here's something else," he went on, feeling in his pocket and retrieving a narrow slip of paper. "I suppose you know there was a reward of two thousand rupees offered for Tura Baz, and it goes without saying that you get that. You saved the Govern-

## *Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

ment twenty thousand in hard cash, not to mention the cost of a war, for with Tura Baz dead the Raghza Khel have all caved in and are eating out of our hands again. The cavalry laid out between fifty and sixty of the blighters with the lance that night, you know—we took 'em completely by surprise in the rear and rode 'em down as they tried to get back over the border. And then Captain Wise—who, as I suppose he's told you, hadn't been near Majri at all that night, but had been lying doggo midway between the fort and the village—butted in on the south and got another twenty or twenty-five. So, what with one thing and another, the Raghza Khel have their tails well between their legs."

"Serve 'em right, the smelly airedales!" breathed Futter, with feeling.

"I agree," rejoined the Brigadier, with a laugh. "However, to get back to business, here's a Treasury order for your reward, Futter, and you'll notice that it's made out for three thousand instead of two. The extra thousand is because of the treasure-chest, you understand. Well, you can either draw the amount in cash, or have it put to your credit in the Imperial Bank, just as you please. I strongly advise the bank, me boy, for loose money's the very devil to have lying about, take it from me."

"Very good, sir. Thank you very much, sir!"

"Nonsense—thank *you*, my dear fellow! Well,

## *Lean Brown Men*

I must be buzzing along now, I'm afraid ; see you again in a day or two, I hope. Captain Wise will be in to see you presently, I expect. I passed him on the road, riding in this direction."

Futter eyed his superior interrogatively. "Young lady with 'im?" he inquired knowingly.

"Eh? Why, yes. How the devil did you know?"

Futter nodded, and so far forgot himself as to wink.

"That'll be Miss Sheila Darell, I lay, sir," he surmised confidently. "Ole Wiz—I mean Captain Wise, sir—told me as 'ow 'im and 'er was engaged like, beg pardon, sir——"

"The devil!" exclaimed the Brigadier, rising and holding out his hand. "And what about yourself, Corporal Futter? You'll be the next, I suppose, with all this money to splash about? You'd better look out, you know. A full corporal with three thousand doubloons in the bank would be a good catch for any girl!"

But Albert Futter shook his head slowly from side to side. "Not me, sir," he replied, with a crooked Cockney grin. "Beg pardon, sir, but I don't 'old with married corporals."

"Eh? And why the devil not, now?"

"Because, sir," said Futter sententiously, "a man can't run a section *and* a wife, sir—an' if 'e tries 'e'll lose one or t'other before 'e's through."

"God bless my soul!" cried the amazed Brigadier. "Now, what makes you say that,

*Moonrise at Fort Marjorie*

Futter? You sound almost as if you're talking from experience."

"I am that, sir! I've 'ad a few of 'em in my time, sir, and coo, I could tell you a thing or two!"

"Dud section commanders, what?"

Corporal Futter regarded his superior with a look of withering scorn, and made a gesture downwards and sideways with his right hand.

"Naow! They ran their *sections* O.K., sir; but their 'alf-sections—coo, lumme!"

"The devil!" cried the Brigadier, and fled.





## Book II

### MUBARIKH DAY

#### I

SO long as one can lay aside one's work and worship at the shrine of idleness, an English heat-wave can be a most delightful experience. There was nothing to keep me in London, where I was simply killing time at my club ; and an ineluctable yearning for the open country, coupled with a standing invitation from my sister Sheila and her husband, Adrian Wise—both, like myself, home on leave from India—made me pack a bag and betake myself to the delightful little cottage which they had found in the heart of the Sussex Weald ; and there I lazed and loafed without let, hindrance, or shame.

That Saturday afternoon was the hottest ever. As usual, we had lunched out of doors, and thereafter I had composed myself to a real orgy of sloth in a gaily striped deck-chair in the sweet-smelling orchard. Just as I was closing my eyes and folding my hands to slumber, Adrian—clad in two towels *et præterea nihil*—passed my chair on his way to the little brook which obligingly gurgles through a sheltered corner of the orchard, announcing that he proposed to

## *Lean Brown Men*

spend the afternoon immersed in its cool and limpid waters. Ten minutes later, Sheila, hatless and stockingless, but otherwise more decently dressed than I had seen her since my arrival, disturbed me to announce that she was borrowing my car to go into Stillbrook, the nearest town.

Drowsily I bade her be gone and leave me in peace, whereupon she kissed me lightly on the forehead and rustled away.

I successfully swatted the inevitable fly and closed my eyes again. A heavenly stillness settled on the orchard, and deep peace brooded over the land. Bees hummed overhead; an occasional dove moaned soporifically; and the distant rivulet chuckled faintly as it scurried between its mossy banks and over the unaccustomed obstacle presented by my brother-in-law's tanned body.

Yet a little sleep, a little slumber. . . . My forty winks extended to eighty. . . . England, my England . . . The Glory of the Garden . . . A lovesome thing, God wot . . . Peace, perfect peace . . . O Paradise. . . .

And then, of a sudden, I was wide awake again. A strange new sound was superimposed on the gentle hum of Nature—a sound as of some exotic creature in distress or fear. My eyes clicked open, and a single glance sufficed to show that its author was Adrian, who was approaching at speed through the long grass,

## *Mubarikh Day*

heedless of thistles and stinging-nettles, his skin still glistening with the waters of the brook and a look of anxious concern on his not uncomely features. I sat up in my chair and regarded him with as stern a look as I could summon.

"How now, brother?" I demanded, as soon as he was within convenient earshot. "Why this distressful clamour? Has a fish bitten you, or was it merely a newt?"

Adrian came to a halt a yard or two away and began drying himself feverishly with a gaudy towel as he spoke.

"I say, Marcus, what's the date?" he inquired anxiously, an urgent note in his voice.

"Oh, about June, I should think," I replied, with assumed carelessness, striving to conceal my curiosity.

"No, do quit fooling!" begged my brother-in-law earnestly. "Is it the ninth to-day?"

I picked up a newspaper and consulted the heading. "The ninth it is," I confirmed. "Why, what's it all about, Adrian? Forgotten to pay your instalment on something?"

"Ass! No, look here, old boy, lend me your car for an hour or so, will you? I've simply got to rush into Stillbrook, or there'll be the devil to pay."

I shook my head regretfully. "Sorry—it can't be done, Adrian. You'd be welcome to the car if it was here, but, unfortunately, your hag has already forestalled you."

"What! Sheila taken the car?"

## *Lean Brown Men*

"Nearly an hour ago," I replied, glancing at my watch. "Didn't you hear her go?"

Adrian's jaw dropped, and a look of utter horror spread over his face. Then he fetched a groan that would have done credit to Pious Æneas.

"Oh, ten million little pink-and-purple devils!" he gasped despairingly, sinking into a vacant chair. "Losh, that's done it! What on earth has she gone for?"

"Couldn't say. I was half-asleep when she announced her impending departure, and I didn't take the trouble to ask; but, now I come to think of it, didn't she say something at breakfast about changing her library books?"

Adrian nodded lugubriously. "She did, brother. And that means she'll probably be hours and hours. Sheila in a library is like a wasp in a jam-pot. Oh, Lord—that's torn it good and proper!"

I passed him my cigarette-case, and we lit up in silence.

"And now, suppose you tell me what the trouble is," I suggested amiably.

Adrian blew out a cloud of smoke and looked at me more calmly. "The trouble is," he explained, "that somehow or other I've simply got to send off a cable to the Regiment this afternoon. To-morrow, June 10th, is Mubarikh Day—our big annual feast-day, so to speak—and my name will be absolutely mud if they don't hear from me. Everyone who is, or ever

## *Mubarikh Day*

has been, connected with the Regiment wires or cables congratulations, you see—old buffers on pension, widows and orphans, chaps on leave, everyone ! ”

I nodded understandingly. Most regiments have their pet anniversaries—my own is no exception to the rule. “ Mubarikh Day ” had a faintly familiar ring about it, though its precise significance escaped me. I questioned Adrian on the subject.

“ Oh, that’s a long yarn, but there it is. I only remembered it five minutes ago, and now what the heck am I going to do ? ”

“ Quite easy,” I answered soothingly. “ Put on some clothes, and stroll gently but firmly across the fields to old Apted’s farm ; he’s on the ’phone, and all you have to do is to ring up the village exchange and say your piece.”

Adrian snorted contemptuously. “ Thank you, brother ; and may I ask if you have ever attempted the latter feat yourself ? Are you acquainted with Mrs. Huggins, the village post-mistress ? Have you ever tried to make her understand across the counter the difference between a three-halfpenny stamp and three halfpenny ones ? Well, then, don’t talk bilge ! Great Snakes, one day when we first came here I tried to ’phone her a wire to a man named Smith, living at 10 High Street, Stillbrook. It took her thirteen minutes to get the name and address right, and nearly half an hour for the bob’s-worth of text. So much for Mrs. Huggins !

## *Lean Brown Men*

And what do you suppose she'd make of a cable addressed to Subadar-Major Khayal Zada, Nth Piffers, Dera Ismail Khan?"

I saw his point. "It certainly would shake her a bit," I agreed, "but—forgive my curiosity—why address it to the Subadar-Major, of all people? Surely it should go to the Colonel, or the Mess President, or someone like that?"

Adrian shook his head.

"Oh, no. That'd be all right for Christmas or any ordinary occasion, but Mubarikh Day is essentially the Indian Officers' palaver. I'll tell you about it some other time, if you like, but the whole point is, you see, that Mubarikh Day commemorates a frontier scrap way back in the Year Dot, when all the British Officers were killed or wounded and the Subadar-Major of those days—Milkha Singh his name was—fought a first-class rear-guard action against terrific odds and brought the Regiment out of the ghastliest hole you can imagine. That's why we make a fuss of the Indian Officers on June 10th, and that's why we wire the S-M. Marcus, old boy, I don't know what to do about it. Mrs. Huggins is quite out of the question, I'm afraid. Even if we got past the address, the one word which constitutes the text is Urdu, too."

"Good Lord! What is it?"

"Just '*Mubarikh*.' It's got a sort of double meaning, you see: it's the name of the place where the scrap took place, and it's also, as you know, the Urdu for 'Congratulations,' so it

## *Mubarikh Day*

serves both purposes. But—hell's cheese!—how am I going to send the perishing thing?"

I pondered the problem in silence for a moment.

"Well, in the first place, I don't suppose Sheila will be so very late, will she?" I offered at length. "The post-office at Stillbrook doesn't close till 7, so if she's back by 6.15, or even 6.30, you still ought to be able to do it, by treading on the gas. Alternatively, of course, you could always walk down to the village and hand the cable to Mrs. Huggins in writing."

"What! Four miles across the fields on a day like this! Besides, that wouldn't work either, because Mrs. Huggins would then have to 'phone it on to somewhere else, and Lord knows what it would be like by the time it arrived—if it ever did. No, so far as I can see, the only hope is that Sheila won't fall in with any pals, and will be back in reasonable time. I can't leave it till to-morrow, for to-morrow's Sunday; and besides, since Indian time is five or six hours ahead of Greenwich, I daren't leave it later than this evening. Well, one can but hope for the best. Dash it, I wish Sheila had told me she was going—she could have sent it off for me. Thoughtless creatures, women!"

"My dear ass," I retorted with heat, "considering that Sheila departed an hour ago and you've only just remembered your wretched cable, I don't see that *she* is the thoughtless creature in the case. However, cheer up!



## *Lean Brown Men*

She'll probably be back for tea, you know ; she'd hardly trust us to get our own, seeing how she molly-coddles you ! ”

Adrian favoured me with a withering look, and slowly ambled back to his bathing-pool. For myself, I tried to resume my nap, but the golden spell was broken and my brain refused to compose itself. The pleasant hum of bees was reinforced by the cacophonous drone of a low-flying aeroplane ; the doves' organ-notes by a wurlitzer of rooks and starlings. A posse of flies played leap-frog and kiss-in-the-ring over every available inch of my face and arms, and drove me indoors for insecticide.

It was then that I got a shock, for inside the French windows I beheld a tea-table laid for two, bearing a note in Sheila's writing warning us to “ be sure to warm the pot ” before making tea. Methought this boded ill for Adrian's chances of reaching Stillbrook before the post-office closed.

We waited till half-past five, when we consumed a pessimistic tea together. At six, Sheila was still absent. At 6.15 Adrian was in a perfect fever of impatience and uttering horrid imprecations against the wife of his bosom and all her relations, notably myself. At 6.25 he decided to walk down the road in the hope of meeting her, and was only restrained by my reminder that the road forked a couple of hundred yards away, and that there was no telling by which route

## *Mubarikh Day*

Sheila would return. At 6.30 he abandoned hope altogether, and fell to inventing excuses for not having cabled. We had just decided that mental aberration following a mishap to a car would be at once the most convincing and least mendacious, when there was a scrunch of rubber on gravel, and my car, piloted by Sheila, slunk stealthily up the drive.

Uttering a wild yell, Adrian launched himself towards the car and leaped upon the running-board almost before it had come to a standstill. Sheila's care-free smile turned to a look of puzzled surprise as her husband sought to clamber over the door and take her place at the wheel. Wilfully misinterpreting his eagerness, she flashed me a lightning wink and, arms outstretched, greeted him with a loving kiss.

"Darling!" she yummed ecstatically, "how sweet of you to miss me so badly! But—why, what's the matter, precious? You look all wild-eyed and passionate——"

With a torrent of words Adrian interrupted her and explained the situation. Even as he spoke he was elbowing her out of the driving-seat and preparing to make a dash for it. A glance at my watch showed that he had roughly nineteen minutes in which to cover thirteen miles. Then, with another wink at me, Sheila placed a daintily gloved hand over his mouth, and with the other stroked his ruffled hair.

"But listen, my lamb," I heard her protesting,

## *Lean Brown Men*

in a soothing, maternal sort of voice, "what on earth do you suppose I've been all the way to Stillbrook for this afternoon, if it wasn't to send off our cable to the Regiment——"

"*What!*" shrieked Adrian and I, in unison.

"But of course, my dear stupid—why else? True, I snooped round the library a bit as well, and had a couple of ices at the Regal, but the cable was naturally the main thing. You see, angel, you seemed to have forgotten the date, and you said you were going to bathe, so——"

"You—you've sent it?" gurgled Adrian faintly.

"Golly, aren't I telling you, sweetness?"

"*Corpo di Baccho!* Who to?"

"Why, the S-M, of course."

"Khayal Zada?"

"Naturally. He's still Subadar-Major, isn't he?"

"Hell's cheese! And what about the text?"

"Text, darling—what's the text?"

"The body of the message, dash it——"

"Oh, I see. Why, just '*Mubarikh*,' of course, Adrian. You didn't want to say anything else, did you? Oh, and you owe me eight and eightpence, dearest; the girl tried to charge ten and ten, and I had an *awful* job persuading her that Dera Ismail Khan all counts as one word——"

A pregnant pause; then—"Sheila, you angel!"

"Adrian, my boofullest!"

## *Mubarikh Day*

"Yum-yum. . . ."

"Wooky-ooky-ookums. . . ."

Slightly nauseated, I turned away and left them to it.

I returned to the subject that evening, when supper had been cleared away and we were seated at ease in the orchard under a half-moon.

"And now," I began, choosing a propitious moment, "after the emotional and somewhat maudlin events of this afternoon, suppose you tell me all about this precious Mubarikh Day of yours. How and why is it celebrated? I have already gathered that it commemorates some ancient clash of arms or border foray, and that a spate of monotonously worded telegrams descends upon the Subadar-Major, but I'd like to know a few more details."

Adrian pulled at his pipe for a few moments without replying.

"Well, brother," he said at length, "I could tell you all I know about it from the Regimental History, but if you're really interested I think I can do you better than that. The fact is, after a great deal of research, I've succeeded in tracking down the one and only survivor of the scrap—an old boy named Thackeray, who lives at Wimbledon. He's not one of our chaps really: he's an ex-Sapper who was out with the Regiment that day, and lost a leg over it. We've got a

## *Lean Brown Men*

new edition of the Regimental History coming out next year, and, as Mubarikh Day is one of our biggest pre-War dates, it struck me that it would be a good show if we could get hold of an actual eye-witness. So far as I can make out there were nine British Officers mixed up in it altogether : six belonging to the Regiment, one Political-wallah, one Gunner, and a hitherto unnamed Sapper, whom I've now discovered to be Thackeray. The Political and four of our fellows were killed outright ; both the others died of wounds within a day or two. The Gunner was wounded too, but he recovered and wasn't killed till 1915, by which time he was a major-general. Thackeray lost a leg and has thereby survived, though he must be devilish old by now."

"When did the show take place?"

"June 10th, 1876. That's—let's see—that's well over sixty years ago. Thackeray was a lieutenant then, so we can take it he was probably in the early twenties. That'd make him at least eighty-five now, but the old boy still writes a dashed good letter and says he'll be delighted to spill the yarn if I care to look him up. As a matter of fact, Sheila and I are going to see him next week, and, judging by his very charming chit, I should say he wouldn't be a bit peeved if we took a pal along. Care to join us, Marcus?"

"Good Lord, yes—rather!" I assented fervently. "That's really remarkably civil of you,

## *Mubarikh Day*

Adrian—if you're sure the ancient warrior won't object."

"Good. Well, let's call it a date, then, shall we? Next Friday afternoon, for tea. Sheila and I will come up to Town in the morning, and you shall stand us lunch and drive us down to Wimbledon afterwards. O.K.?"

"Lobster mayonnaise, and strawberries and cream," mused Sheila absently, gazing at the moon. "Preferably on the terrace at the Splendacious."

"Gluttony," I observed, fixing her with a stern look, "is not only one of the Seven Deadly Sins, but is also held by many theologians to be the prime cause of the other six. St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theolog*——"

"Ah, put a sock in it!" murmured my sister elegantly. "Isn't this moon just divine?"

And so it came about that, six days later, light of pocket but replete with crustaceans and strawberries, I brought my car to a standstill outside a pleasant detached house not far from Wimbledon Common, and the three of us alighted and advanced up the garden path. An elderly maid answered our ring and ushered us into the hall. Mr. Thackeray, she said, was in the back garden and was expecting us; perhaps we would be good enough to step through?

She led us through sundry passages to a cool, airy room at the back of the house, whence French windows gave access to a large and

## *Lean Brown Men*

exquisitely kept garden. As our procession descended the one or two steps a distant voice cried "Gad!" and we beheld a red-faced, white-haired giant of a man, dressed in well-cut grey flannels, rising from a wicker chair and hurrying forward to greet us. Somehow or other I had pictured our host as a more or less helpless cripple, very old and fragile, but, apart from an almost imperceptible limp, he appeared to be in considerably ruder health than many a man half a century his junior. A closely trimmed white beard gave him a naval rather than a military appearance, and a pair of remarkably clear blue eyes conspired in this delusion.

"Captain Wise?" he roared affably, while still a dozen yards away. "Captain Wise of the *Nth* Piffers? Gad, sir, this is a pleasure indeed! Dam—I mean, dash it, sir—how do you do?" He grasped Adrian's hand in a grip that made my brother-in-law wince. "And this is your wife?"—here he seized Sheila's hand and kissed it with fine old-fashioned gallantry—"Gad, sir, I congratulate you; and you too, madam, on having married into the grand old *Nth*!"

Adrian waved a hand in my direction. "I took the liberty of bringing along my brother-in-law," he explained. "Major Darell, of Darell's Horse. I hope you don't mind."

Mr. Thackeray grasped my hand and wrung it warmly.

"Darell, of Darell's Horse?" he boomed.

## *Mubarikh Day*

"Gad, there's a familiar ring about that! Why, damme, you must be old James Darell's boy—or grandson, is it?"

"Great-nephew," I replied. "Uncle James never married, you know, sir. Did you ever know him?"

"Know him? Of course I knew him. Who didn't in India, in my day? Magnificent feller: one of the greatest men the Frontier ever produced, in my opinion. I take it he's dead now, though?"

"Not a bit of it," I laughed. "Still going strong, though he's just on ninety. He lives down near Crowborough, and takes a very lively interest in everything that happens. . . ."

Chatting amicably, our host led the way slowly across the turf to a group of shady trees, beneath which a tea-table and chairs were arranged. Sheila, who adores flowers, won his heart at once by her little involuntary cries of delight as bed after bed of choice blooms revealed itself to her enraptured gaze. Even to my male eyes that garden was a picture of loveliness, and the old man chuckled with pleasure as we murmured our encomiums.

"Not too bad for an old man!" he laughed, as we reached our destination. "No—I don't do the actual work myself—can't get down to it with this game leg—but I supervise every leaf and root in the place, and Hart does as I tell him. Ex-corporal, R.E., is Hart, though how the—I mean, how he ever got his stripes God—



## *Lean Brown Men*

I mean, I don't know. He hasn't the brain of a—no brain at all, dash it! Well, well, sit you down, won't you? And let's have some tea.—Daisy! *Daisy!* Where the—I mean, where's that dam—dashed old—old—ah, there she is! Gad, she's bringing it. . . .”

I will not write of my mental reactions when I saw that the *pièce de résistance* of the meal was to be strawberries and cream. Adrian flashed me a most pregnant look, while Sheila administered a sharp hack to my shin and, lying splendidly, assured our host that they were the first she had tasted that year. And so they might have been, judging by the number she consumed. Adrian and I did less justice to them, while Mr. Thackeray ate no more than half a dozen, declaring (to our immense secret delight) that *his* tea consisted of “bread and jam, and no dam—dashed kick-shaws!”

“And now,” said our host, when at last the débris had been cleared away, “I gather you want to hear all about Mubarikh? Gad, I've told the story often enough round here, but you might as well talk to a pack of nannygoats as to the old—old—to the people round here. They don't know the difference between a Pathan and a python, and I think they imagine that a Piffer regiment consists of cow-boys in red shirts and slouch hats. However, you're different, and I'll do my best to tell you all I can remember of it. Of course, you know the main

## *Mubarikh Day*

features of the affair already, but I'll begin from the very beginning, so as to make the yarn as connected as possible. All ready? Right—here goes, then ! ”

## II

In 1876 (our host began) I was a subaltern of the Royal Engineers attached to the Bengal Sappers and Miners—or “Suffering Miners,” as they called us—at Davisabad, now known as Gulzai. I've often thought I'd like to go back and have another look at that part of the world, but I've kept on putting it off, and I suppose I'm too old now. As a matter of fact, I doubt if it has altered so very much, and I expect if I went to Gulzai to-morrow I'd find it much the same as the Davisabad that I knew. And as for the country round about, nothing short of an earthquake could change that ! I hear they've been making roads and bridges and concrete block-houses all over the place lately, but for all that I'll bet I could find my way from Gulzai to Mubarikh without a guide, for you can't change the shape of those hills, and even if the nullahs are a bit deeper and the river-beds a bit wider—well, that wouldn't put me off !

Now, I hope you don't expect me to give you a detailed account of the political situation in those days. Remember that I was only a

## *Lean Brown Men*

subaltern, and subalterns don't care two straws for politics, generally speaking. All we cared about then was having a scrap with the wily Pathan, and we got plenty of that sort of thing one way and another, for the tribesmen weren't by any means pleased at the habit we had of encroaching on their preserves ; and even if they had been they'd still have scrapped just the same, that being the way they're made. I've never had any use for those weak-kneed idiots who talk about the Pathan being "treacherous," and all that bunkum. It seems to me that if a British general pulls off a bit of dirty work on the tribesmen it's described as "brilliant tactics," whereas if the tables are turned it's "incredible treachery." Gad, sir, if a gang of foreigners came and made themselves at home on my property, wouldn't I be justified in doing all I could to turf 'em out ? Besides, people who talk about the Pathan's "treachery" don't understand the fellow's mentality. I always say the Pathan is the exact counterpart of the Irishman—a keen patriot, a religious zealot, and always game for a fight, public or private ! Treachery my elbow !

Anyway, if surprise tactics are treachery, Mubarikh was treason if you like—on both sides ! You've read all the official despatches, of course—I don't mean the reports sent in by the men on the spot, but the version dished up by the Government and the press of those days, representing our troops as a sort of Girls' Friendly

## *Mubarikh Day*

Society outing, and the Pathans as double-dyed sons of iniquity, steeped in treachery and vice. Gad, sir, all poppycock ! All my eye and Betty Martin ! Our chaps were the *Nth* Piffers : as grand a gang of Catch-'em-alive-o's as ever shouldered arms ; and our opponents were the Nishta Khel Waziris. Heaven forbid that I should try to decide which side were the better fighters. But I tell you this : we asked for trouble, and the Nishta Khel saw that we got it ; and, if they'd been up against anything less tough than the *Nth*, they'd have pulled it off, too !

But when it was over, did we who'd been through that day of hell mope about "treachery" or any nonsense like that ? Bless me, that day cost me my leg and my career, but I still bear no malice against the Nishta Khel. They caught us on the hop, and those of us who came out alive were dashed thankful for even that small mercy. We called it "the fortune of war" in those days. There doesn't seem to be such a thing now.

But I'm beginning at the wrong end, as usual, and perhaps what I've said doesn't sound any too complimentary to the *Nth* Piffers. Still, to read the official despatches anyone *would* think that the *Nth* were out on an innocent sort of Sunday-school treat, and, although that may go down very well with the ordinary civilian, surely it must strike a professional soldier as queer that a battalion with a fine reputation like the *Nth*'s

## *Lean Brown Men*

should walk into a trap and only escape by the skin of their teeth?

Well, that's the first point I want to deal with. I've read your Regimental History, Wise, and, like all other unimaginative official accounts, it glosses over that part of the story and only gets mildly enthusiastic when it comes to old Milkha Singh's rear-guard action. Natural in a way, I suppose, for regimental histories aren't very much concerned with politics. All the same, if you're bringing out a revised edition I'd venture to suggest that you include a brief prologue to the Mubarikh affair, giving a few political details.

After all, soldiers don't make wars : they keep the peace. It's the politicians who make wars, and that holds good equally in the case of a small frontier scrap like Mubarikh and a full-scale world conflict. . . .

The man who made the Mubarikh affair was one Delabere, who was Political Agent in those parts. Gad, he was a rum feller, was Delabere—but then, who ever knew a Political that wasn't? I always say they're a race apart : gifted men as a rule, with brilliant minds, and yet there's generally a kink somewhere too. Delabere was a Civilian, a fine linguist, and altogether a remarkably able man, but he had his kink like the rest of 'em, and in his case it was a passion for what they call "secret diplomacy." He was the sort of chap one used to read about in old-

## *Mubarikh Day*

fashioned Secret Service novels—as close as a coffin-lid and a born exponent of the double bluff. Mind you, I'm not suggesting for a moment that a man in his position should confide all he knows to Tom, Dick, and Harry, and anyone who knows how secrets leak out on the frontier will forgive him for keeping his own counsel to a certain extent. But Delabere undoubtedly carried his fad to extremes, and I know for a fact that even old Cardus, the Brigadier, wasn't by any means wholly in his confidence. At any rate, there's no doubt whatever that he hoodwinked everyone over the Mubarikh business, from the Brigadier downwards. It's difficult to say exactly where a man ceases to be a diplomat and becomes a liar, but Delabere was a borderline case, to say the least of it.

Even now, I can't determine precisely what was in his innermost mind when he planned the Mubarikh expedition. He produced two reasons at the time, but in my opinion neither of them was the true one. There was a third and more subtle reason somewhere in the depths of his brain, but the secret of that died with him, and we shall never know what it was this side of the grave. So all I can tell you now is what he told us when the show was being planned.

Well, as you know, Gulzai stands at the eastern end of the Patrila Valley, which is one of the lesser-known main routes from Afghanistan into India. You also know that the so-called North-

## *Lean Brown Men*

West Frontier consists not of one single border, but of two quite separate ones: the Afghan frontier proper, or Durand Line, and what they call the Administrative Border. In other words, there's a long, narrow strip of country in between these two frontiers, which acts as a sort of buffer between India and Afghanistan, and which is called Tribal Territory.

Now, from Gulzai to the Administrative Border was a matter of some thirty or thirty-five miles, our most advanced post being at Dwazám, where the Patríla River joins up with the Spinóba. According to Delabere, the Government didn't like this at all, because along the rest of the border the Durand Line was some ten or fifteen miles farther west, with the result that Dwazám formed the apex of a triangular re-entrant, which the Government was thinking of straightening out. Personally, I don't believe a word of it, for the simple reason that it never *has* been straightened out from that day to this, and there seems no real reason why it should be, except to make the maps look tidier. But that was Delabere's yarn, and he made out that the idea was to establish two further posts—one up each of the two river-beds—about ten or twelve miles beyond Dwazám.

The country that we were proposing to annex in this way was inhabited by the Nishta Khel, a small but extremely warlike sub-tribe of Waziris. Ethnologically, I believe, they belonged to a more northern stock, but they were said to have

## *Mubarikh Day*

drifted down to this part of the world three or four generations previously, and to have settled themselves on the triangular tract of land between the two rivers. Their leader in those days was rather a well-known character—a fellow named Shah Baz, who had built a name for himself as a brave fighter and a wily general—and it seemed most unlikely that he and his merry men would welcome the idea of giving up ten or a dozen miles of their rather restricted territory without putting up a fight for it. But, in any case, that would have been a job for a proper expeditionary force—a couple of brigades at least—and Delabere wasn't proposing to do that for some little time to come.

All he wanted to do now, he said, was to ride up there and have a look round: select the sites for the new forts, check the existing maps with the actual country, and generally get things in train for an expedition later on.

I must remind you again that I myself was only a Sapper subaltern, and therefore I can't pretend to give you a verbatim account of all the preliminary discussions that took place. However, so far as I can make out, Delabere went to the Brigadier and unfolded as much of his plans as his secretive mind would concede, and asked for an escort of one company of infantry to go with him. Old Cardus, who was an ex-Piffer himself—he'd commanded the *Nth*



## *Lean Brown Men*

for donkey's years before he got his brigade—laughed at him and told him that such an idea was sheer suicide and murder. He said he *might* think about letting him venture beyond Dwazám with a battalion as escort, but that to send one company by itself a dozen miles into tribal territory was completely out of the question.

Delabere disagreed. He said he was going on a peaceful mission to a friendly tribe, and that he wanted a small escort more to emphasize his dignity as Her Majesty's representative than for protective purposes, and that if he marched up there with a battalion of armed men the Nishta Khel would get suspicious and mistake the visit for an unfriendly gesture. For some time, I gather, Cardus stuck to his guns, and Delabere to his. The trouble was, you see, that, although Cardus, as Brigadier, was held responsible for everything that happened in his area, Delabere, as Political Agent, was working directly under the Government of India, and was entitled to call on the military for such help as he might require.

Well, eventually Cardus agreed in principle to provide an escort for Delabere's mission, and the question of its strength was shelved for the time being. And now I myself come into the picture, for Delabere wanted to take a Sapper along with him to give technical advice on the siting of the forts and also to do a bit of rough-and-ready surveying on the q.t. I was selected

## *Mubarikh Day*

for the job, and attended a conference at Brigade Headquarters to settle details. Those present were Delabere, the Brigadier, myself, Colonel Coney—the C.O. of the *N*th, who were to provide the escort—and McGregor, his adjutant. And a fine old rumpus it was, too!

First of all Delabere outlined his scheme. He told us the yarn I've already described to you, about straightening out the Administrative Border and building the two forts. But, as he pointed out, it would never do to let the Nishta Khel get wind of that, and he therefore unfolded the Machiavellian excuse he was making for his visit to their territory.

It was quite plausible, really. A few weeks earlier, another Waziri tribe, farther south, had attacked one of our posts and raided half a dozen villages on our side of the border, and goodness knows where the affair wouldn't have ended if Shah Baz and the Nishta Khel hadn't seized the opportunity to fall on this other tribe in the rear and indulge in a bit of loot and slaughter on their own account. There wasn't the least reason to suppose that Shah Baz had done this out of friendliness to ourselves, but Delabere's scheme was to pretend that the Government regarded his timely diversion as a preconceived act of friendship towards us, and had voted him a reward of five hundred rupees. Delabere had actually obtained sanction to draw on Government funds to that extent, and he was making the presentation of this sum, in silver

## *Lean Brown Men*

rupees, the ostensible object of his spying expedition. He had already sent word to Shah Baz of his approaching visit, and now it only remained to settle about the escort and the date of starting. He understood, he said, that the *Nth* Piffers were providing the escort, so would Colonel Coney be good enough to detail one company, with a British Officer, to be ready to set out in four days' time?

Gad, I can see old Coney's face even now! A funny little shrimp of a man he was, with a huge head and an untidy black beard. A tough, if ever there was one—and your Piffer regiments produced some hard cases in those days, I don't mind telling you! Coney had spent all his service in the *Nth*, and he knew his Frontier almost inch by inch, just as he knew every sepoy in his battalion by name and record. Anyway, he just sat and looked at Delabere for a few moments as if he were a new and interesting type of fish in an aquarium, and then he burst out laughing. And when he'd finished laughing he banged his fist on the table and swore that he'd be damned, dashed, and dangled before he'd detail a company for such a mad venture. No, by Gad!—and not even two companies, or a wing. It was a battalion job, and Delabere could have the battalion or nothing! Did the Political imagine for a minute that Shah Baz would be deceived by a cock-and-bull story like that? Not he! No, if Delabere had set his heart on going to call on him, he'd want the

## *Mubarikh Day*

whole of the *N*th, and guns as well, and even then they'd be none too safe.

Well, to cut a long story short, they wrangled and argued for an hour or more. The Brigadier simply sat back in his chair and grinned, and refused to be drawn in. His point was that the P.A. had asked for an escort, and that the *N*th had been told to provide one, and that it was now up to Colonel Coney to decide what force would be necessary. Delabere fretted and fumed, and tried to do the heavy politician, but the odds were against him. So at last they compromised, the arrangement being that the whole of the *N*th should march out as far as Dwazám, where one wing—that is, four companies—should be dropped as a reserve; the other wing and Headquarters would furnish the escort proper, and accompany Delabere into tribal territory. And so it was settled.

Delabere had sent word to Shah Baz that he would be arriving on June 10th at Mubarikh, and had asked for a tribal *jirga* to be assembled there on that date. From Gulzai to Dwazám was a two-days' march, and on account of the heat we decided to do those two marches by night. Then we'd have a day's rest at Dwazám and go on to Mubarikh in the cool of the next morning. We were to bivouac at Mubarikh on the night of the 10th, and march back to Dwazám early on the 11th.

III

We carried out the first part of the programme all right. Leaving Gulzai on the night of June 7th, we fetched up at Dwazám just before dawn on the 9th. I forgot to mention, by the way, that Colonel Coney had had his way about the guns, and that our column included a half-section of a Piffer Mountain Battery—the *L*th, I believe, wasn't it? They were in charge of one Mackworth, who was killed in France as a Divisional Commander during the War. There were eleven of us altogether in Mess that night: Delabere, of course; Colonel Coney, Brigstock, Ashton, Drewe, McGregor, and Barnet-White, all of the *N*th, plus Maguire, their surgeon-major; Mackworth, the gunner; Gilchrist, commanding the Dwazám garrison; and myself.

We were a cheery enough crowd that night. Delabere, who was normally rather "strong and silent," was unusually pleased with himself for once in a way, and no one dreamed that in less than twenty-four hours only two of us—Ashton and Gilchrist—wouldn't be either killed or wounded. We youngsters were by nature a happy-go-lucky crowd, and took no special thought for the morrow, but even old Coney seemed to have forgotten his fears and scruples about the expedition. I think he felt that with his beloved *N*th behind him nothing could possibly go wrong, and he certainly gave the

## *Mubarikh Day*

impression of being as keen on exploring this new tract of territory as any of us juniors.

After dinner, Delabere cleared off to interview some of the local head-men, and Colonel Coney seized the opportunity to get out his map and run through the plans for the next day with us. We were to march at 4 a.m., up the Spinóba river-bed, and that should bring us to Mubarikh by 8 or 8.30. As it was a peace-march, there would be no actual piqueting of the heights, but he nevertheless took the normal precaution of telling off advance, rear, and flank guards. The original intention had been, as I've said, for one wing—Ashton's—to remain at Dwazám, but the Colonel now revealed to us that he considered this too far away to be of any practical use. After consultation with Gilchrist, therefore, who knew the country better than we did, it was arranged that our Reserve should give us a couple of hours' start, and then march out and take up a position on a ridge which crossed the river-bed at right angles, about four miles from Dwazám. It looked from the map as if this would give them a pretty good view of the country towards Mubarikh, and, even if it didn't, it at least meant that help would be four miles closer to us than it would otherwise have been. By general consent, we decided not to breathe a word of this plan to Delabere. Ashton wouldn't move out till we were half-way to Mubarikh, and would begin to retire on Dwazám the moment our advance-guard came in sight on the

## *Lean Brown Men*

homeward journey. Gad ! that was a lucky move on old Coney's part, I don't mind telling you.

Having settled these details, we had a final drink and turned in to get a few hours' sleep. To be candid, I myself didn't get a wink. It really was a most remarkable thing. I think I can say I was a normally plucky young fellow, and not bothered with nerves, and until I left our mess-tent that night I hadn't given the slightest thought to the element of danger in our little expedition. Yet the moment I got outside, and saw the ragged silhouette of the surrounding hills picked out by the setting moon—well, "a cold fear clutched at my heart," as they say in spook stories. Heaven knows why ! I'd been mixed up in half a dozen frontier scraps already, but I'd never felt quite as I did that night. And here's the queerest thing of all (nobody believes this when I tell them, but it's as true as that I'm sitting here now) : the moment I got to bed my left leg—the one I was to lose the next day—started to ache, and went on aching most of the night. Nothing very serious, if you understand, and not at all violent ; more like what I imagine rheumatism to be, though I've never suffered from that, praise be !

However, you haven't come here to listen to my own personal troubles. I had a wretched night, but we had to be up at three, and once I was afoot I felt all right again. We snatched a hasty breakfast, and by four o'clock the advance-guard was on the move. It was

## *Mubarikh Day*

already light by the time the main body moved out, and I joined the little crowd of British Officers at the head of the leading company. We were all dismounted. In fact, the only animals with the column were our transport and gun mules.

There's nothing much to be said about that march, for it was pretty uneventful. The river-bed provided a very fair road for us, and we got along at quite a respectable pace. The only point I'd like to mention is that that march brought me in touch for the first time with the man who was destined to become the hero of the day—Milkha Singh, Subadar-Major of the *N*th. I'd known him by sight for some time, of course, but had never had occasion to speak to him, nor he to me.

He was a nice old chap—a typical Sikh from the Jullundur Doab—but, for all that, I must say he wasn't exactly the type of whom one would have expected great things. He was rather dark-skinned, to begin with, and smaller and slighter than the traditional Sikh hero. Then again, he presented an extraordinary study in physiognomy—if that's the science I mean—for it would be practically true to say that he had no chin! Like all Sikhs, he wore his beard curled up in front, and that covered the deficiency to a certain extent, but, marching along beside him, I couldn't help noticing this chinlessness of his, and also the fact that his eyes had that peculiar fried-egg appearance which generally marks the opium-



## *Lean Brown Men*

eater. Altogether, I remember being somewhat surprised that a distinguished battalion like the *Nth* should have such an undistinguished-looking subadar-major, and his conversational powers impressed me even less than his appearance.

I spoke Punjabi fairly well, and as we marched along together I tried to get him to talk. But it was the devil of a job. He was perfectly polite and amiable, but all I could get out of him was "Yes" and "No"—a monotonous sequence of "*Ji-han!*" "*Han-ji!*" and "*Ji-huzoor!*" varied by an occasional "*Beshak!*" Once or twice, when my own repertoire was exhausted, he did venture a remark or two of his own, but they were all the most ridiculous platitudes, like sentences out of a phrase-book, and every one of them was of the type that *Punch* describes as "another glimpse of the obvious." "The hills are high," "there is very little water in the river," "soon it will be hot"—nothing more exciting than that. So it isn't altogether surprising that as soon as I got the chance I deserted him in favour of Mir Jafar, the jemadar-adjutant.

Now, *he* was a fine fellow, if you like: a tall, well-built, good-looking Khattak from the Lachi district, and as bright as Milkha Singh was dull. And presently we were joined by old Kesar Singh, the senior subadar of the leading company, who was one of those enormous, hearty, laughing Sikhs who are the salt of the Indian Army. Striding along between these two, I couldn't help being struck by the unusually marked atmosphere

## *Mubarikh Day*

of good comradeship which appeared to pervade the *Nth*. Of course, in any well-run regiment the various classes rub along well enough together, but in the *Nth* there seemed to be more to it than that. Take Kesar Singh and Mir Jafar, for instance. Theoretically, there were quite a number of barriers between them—race, religion, language, and everything else that counts—and yet they didn't merely tolerate each other; they were good friends.

I'm not altogether wasting time in lingering over that march, because it has given me a chance to introduce you to the *Nth* as it was in 1876. But now we must push on. Despite the absence of a road, we managed to keep up a steady three miles an hour, and shortly after eight o'clock a runner came back from the advance-guard to say that our destination was in sight. Sure enough, in less than half an hour we had arrived at Mubarikh, and were being ceremoniously welcomed by Shah Baz and his fellow *maliks*.

I must explain here that Mubarikh wasn't an ordinary border village of the usual type. As a matter of fact, it consisted of a group of three hamlets, all lying within shouting distance of one another, but the one name seemed to serve for all three. They were all built on the cliffs that formed the south bank of the river, which at this point flowed at the bottom of a deepish ravine. A steep path ran from the river-bed up to the plateau.

## *Lean Brown Men*

The Nishta Khel had turned out in force to greet us. Rounding the last bend in the river, we saw the best part of a thousand of them lining the cliffs, and I can well remember Delabere's little laugh of triumph as he turned to the Colonel and exclaimed : " There, you see—all unarmed, and perfectly friendly ! " The Colonel nodded in silence, and, sure enough, there was not a single rifle or jezail to be seen amongst the entire gathering.

The advance-guard had halted at the foot of the path, and the main body now closed up with it and halted too. Then we saw a solitary figure striding down the slope towards us, and Delabere and the Colonel walked up to meet him. This was Shah Baz himself, and after the two deputations had met and greeted each other, Colonel Coney turned and beckoned to the rest of us British Officers to come along and be introduced. Brigstock, the second-in-command, shouted out to Milkha Singh to take charge, and we all set out to join our leaders.

It was at this point that my late lamented leg gave its second warning. I know this sounds absurdly fantastic, and you needn't believe me if you'd rather not, but I assure you that no sooner had I taken a pace forward to follow Brigstock and the others than my leg, which had behaved splendidly throughout the march, was seized by a violent cramp, which for the moment paralysed me completely. I suppose it actually *was* cramp—the reaction due to standing still

## *Mubarikh Day*

after a twelve-mile march—but, whatever it was, it prevented me from moving for perhaps a minute. And that minute is not without its importance in this story, for it revealed to me the somewhat surprising fact that Subadar-Major Milkha Singh was, to put it mildly, ill at ease concerning what was happening. As I stood there waiting for the cramp to pass, I heard him issuing low-pitched but remarkably clear and decisive orders to Subadar Kesar Singh. The leading company, he said, was to load with ball and be prepared for any contingency. The operation was to be carried out stealthily and independently by each man, and not by word of command to the company as a whole. The “enemy” (as he called the Nishta Khel, despite Delabere and everyone else) must not be allowed to notice the manœuvre. Kesar Singh, I observed, evinced not the slightest surprise at this order ; still less did Mir Jafar, when Milkha Singh told him to convey the same instructions to the companies in rear.

All this was no earthly business of mine. I didn't belong to the Nth, and I cannot pretend that, at the time, I had any very decided views on the matter. If anything, I'm afraid I considered the precaution rather unnecessary, and as a further bit of evidence in support of Milkha Singh's receding chin. In any case, I was far too concerned with my leg to give more than a passing thought to the affair.

Then my cramp disappeared as suddenly as it

## *Lean Brown Men*

had come, and I hastened after the others up the slope, arriving just in time to be presented in my turn to Shah Baz. The chief of the Nishta Khel was a truly magnificent specimen of humanity. About thirty-five years of age, I should say, very fair-skinned, good-looking, and endowed with an almost hypnotic charm of manner. For a Pathan, he was well dressed, too : clean white shirt and baggy trousers, and a Kohat *lungi*—that's a black turban with a cerise and gold fringe, you know—on his head. My knowledge of Pushtu being confined to the commonplace phrases used as greetings, I haven't the remotest idea what he said to me, but he sounded very affable, and I must confess that I took an immediate liking to the fellow. Certainly it appeared that, on the face of it, Delabere had been perfectly right about his "friendliness," and we had not the slightest reason to fear any trickery.

Well, half an hour later the whole crowd of us were comfortably bivouacked on the plateau, under a plantation of trees about equidistant from all three villages. The troops had been marched up from below, arms had been piled and equipment taken off, and the Sikh and Hindu cooks were busy preparing a meal. The Mussulman sepoy, Shah Baz announced, were to be the guests of the Nishta Khel themselves, who had prepared a feast for them. The Sikhs and Dogras were prevented by their caste rules from accepting such hospitality, and we Britishers had

## *Mubarikh Day*

a mule with us carrying our own mess equipment and rations.

For the Frontier, it was a decidedly pleasant little spot. All around us were the barren brown hills, but Mubarikh was like an oasis in the desert. There were several clumps of fine trees, and a number of cultivated fields to the west. To the east, there was actually a kind of orchard—a small plantation of fruit-trees surrounded by a breast-high wall. The three villages formed the points of a roughly equilateral triangle, of which we were in the centre. As is usual in those parts, the villages were built of mud-bricks, and were walled, battlemented, and loopholed, while each was surmounted by one or more tallish watch-towers.

Although we had planned to be there for nearly twenty-four hours, Delabere wasted no time in getting down to the ostensible business upon which he had come. Without waiting even for a meal, he asked Shah Baz to assemble the tribal *jirga*, and as soon as this had been done he went across and addressed it. Whatever else he might be, Delabere was undoubtedly an excellent Pushtu scholar. I myself couldn't make out a hundredth part of what he was saying, but the Nishta Khel understood him all right. They were a fine-looking lot, taken all round; and they must have been remarkable actors, too, for although I watched their faces closely, I saw not a single look or glance to arouse my suspicions. Nor, apparently, did Colonel Coney or any of

## *Lean Brown Men*

the others. The tribesmen's expressions seemed to vary from polite interest to definite approval, and when, after an oration lasting perhaps twenty minutes, Delabere produced his bag of silver rupees and ceremoniously presented it to the smiling Shah Baz, there was quite a round of applause. Then Shah Baz, still holding his reward, made a brief reply, requesting the Political Sahib to convey his grateful thanks to the Government for their munificence, and the little ceremony ended.

By now it must have been close upon ten o'clock, and the heat was already considerable. We all strolled back to the clump of trees beneath which we had stacked our equipment, and some minutes later the mess cook was serving up our second breakfast—the first having been consumed, as I told you, at Dwazám, seven hours earlier. The *Nth* did themselves well so far as food was concerned, but they carried no elaborate mess equipment, and we ate our meal lying at ease on the ground. The men, too, were feeding by now : the Sikhs just inside the orchard to the east, the Dogras near the edge of the cliffs above the river, and the Mussulmans at a point farther west, waited upon by the hospitable Nishta Khel.

We made a leisurely meal. We were all in the best of spirits, pleasantly tired, but feeling very well pleased with the way things were going. Delabere, indeed, was almost too pleased with himself, and adopted a somewhat objectionable

## *Mubarikh Day*

"I told you so!" attitude towards Colonel Coney, which annoyed us youngsters intensely. The Colonel, however, refused to be drawn, and merely chuckled into his untidy black beard, and the conversation soon drifted into other channels. After a time I addressed myself to Delabere on the subject of the site for the proposed fort, and we were beginning to debate the relative merits of the north and south banks of the river, when our attention was distracted by the sound of music from the place where the Mussulman sepoy were being entertained. It was the usual *sranai* and *dhol* music—oboe and tom-tom, in plain English—but these local performers were exceptionally good. Personally, I was always rather fond of Pathan music. Some people can't stand it at any price, I know, but somehow it always appealed to me, so I was quite pleased when the musicians strolled over towards us and began a special recital for our benefit. Shah Baz came with them to inquire, like the perfect host, whether the sound pleased us or not. Delabere nodded assent, and we were then treated to a first-class rendering of one or two of the old Pathan folk-tunes: the famous "Zakhmi Dil," and another which was always a favourite of mine, though I can't remember its Pushtu name. In English it means "She looks around and smiles," or something like that.

This little concert served to remind McGregor, the Adjutant, that the *Nth* had three or four of their pipers with them. Bagpipes were still some-



## *Lean Brown Men*

thing of a novelty in the Indian Army, and the Nth had been one of the first regiments to take them up. They had one piper to each company, and now, at McGregor's suggestion, these four pipers were whistled up and told to march up and down playing their best tunes, to entertain our hosts. This performance proved astoundingly popular, and large crowds of Nishta Khel drifted across to listen to the white man's "squeal-bags." Astonished cries of "Wah, wah!" greeted the pipers' efforts, and several encores were demanded and given.

It was during the fourth or fifth tune, I think, that things began to happen. First of all, Shah Baz got up from where he was sitting, and approaching the crowds of tribesmen who were standing and squatting opposite to us, on the far side of the pipers, said something or other to them. The sound of the pipes made it impossible for us to catch what he was saying, but, whatever it was, it had the instantaneous effect of dispersing the assembly. In little groups they walked slowly away towards their villages, and within a few minutes the place was deserted but for ourselves and Shah Baz. He himself did not immediately depart. He returned to where Delabere was sitting and made a smiling remark, at the same time pointing at the sun. The skirling of the pipes drowned his words so far as I was concerned, but I imagine that he was drawing attention to the lateness of the hour and the necessity for getting on with the day's work. At

## *Mubarikh Day*

any rate, Delabere nodded pleasantly, and Shah Baz, with a respectful salaam to us all, turned on his heel and followed his men towards the village that was facing us. That was the last time any of us had speech with him.

In the absence of orders to stop, the four pipers of the *Nth* were still marching and countermarching in front of us. Even now, after sixty years' interval, I can see their faces and hear the tune that they were playing. It was a quickstep called "The Black Bear," of which I was particularly fond—a fine rousing march of the kind that lifts up your heart and pours courage into you and makes it seem a grand thing to be alive. Gad ! how well I remember those last few moments of peace, before hell broke loose. I'm an old man now, but I can see every detail of that scene as clearly as if it were yesterday. There were the nine of us sitting and sprawling in a rough semicircle under those trees. At one end Delabere and the Colonel, the former still holding forth about something or other to the latter, who was looking bored and sleepy. In the middle Brigstock, Drewe, Mackworth the gunner, Barnet-White, and myself, in that order. And at the far end, sitting rather apart, McGregor and Surgeon Paddy Maguire, the eternal Scotsman and Irishman, wrangling banteringly on the respective virtues of Scottish and Irish bagpipes.

They were always a great pair when they got going, those two Celts, and we in the centre of the group had fallen silent to listen to them. I

## *Lean Brown Men*

can hear dear old Paddy now, saying “—but, Mac, let you listen to me for a moment——”, and then his eyes happened to wander in the direction of the village opposite, and the expression of his face suddenly changed as his voice involuntarily ceased.

For a second we all stared in amazement at Maguire, who pointed to the village and yelled, “Holy Mother ! There’s some devilment there !”

## IV

Like lightning, we turned our heads towards the village, and what we saw made each one of us start to scramble to his feet. For there, on the watch-tower overlooking our position, stood Shah Baz, chief of the Nishta Khel, and in his hand, held at arm’s length above his head, was a naked sword. Three times we saw him circle the blade above his head, as we looked on, spell-bound. In a flash, as he lowered the sword, the walls of the village became alive with men. I remember seeing Delabere start forward, as pale as death, and hearing the Colonel roar “By God ! The swine have got us,” and then there was a terrific volley from the walls.

Four of us fell like one man—Delabere, Brigstock, McGregor, and young Drewe. Delabere and McGregor were killed outright ; Brigstock was dead within half an hour, and Drewe in less

## *Mubarikh Day*

than two days. In addition, the Colonel had a bullet through his sword-arm, and Mackworth one through his groin.

Three seconds later came another volley, which killed the Colonel and Barnet-White, while I had my left knee shattered. A moment after that there was one single deliberate shot, which got poor Paddy Maguire through the heart.

I always feel that at this point in telling the story I ought to use that venerable cliché, "pandemonium broke loose." But, strange to say, that's just what didn't happen. For perhaps two seconds nothing happened, and the only sound I can remember was the dying moan of a punctured bagpipe. Then there was a sharp, authoritative word of command, and two perfectly synchronized volleys from the *Nth*—one from the Sikhs over by the orchard, the other from the Mussulmans farther west. I was in agony with my knee, and my brain was utterly numb with the appalling disaster that had overtaken us, but even so I was sufficiently master of myself to be amazed at the promptness with which the *Nth*'s retaliation came. Telling you about it takes time, but I suppose the interval between the *Nishta Khel*'s first volley and the *Nth*'s reply wasn't more than five or six seconds, at the outside. To my mind—and I'm not speaking loosely—the only possible explanation is that Milkha Singh was gifted with some kind of second-sight, which had enabled him to foresee the tragedy and quietly prepare for it. At any

## *Lean Brown Men*

rate, that's what he had done, and he'd done it pretty thoroughly too, as it turned out.

When, a few days later, Milkha Singh gave his version of the affair to the powers that be, he modestly disclaimed any great credit for what he had done. Ever since the expedition was first mooted, he said, he had felt uneasy about it, and so, as senior Indian Officer present, he had deemed it expedient to take certain precautions against surprise. He had not consulted the *Sahib-log*, since they appeared to have absolute confidence in the sincerity of the Nishta Khel's welcome—a confidence which he himself had been unable to share. For the best part of an hour before the attack occurred, the Sikh company had been in position behind the orchard wall, ready to fire at a moment's notice. The Mussulmans and the Dogras, being more exposed to view, could not have taken up similar positions without exciting suspicion, but word had nevertheless been passed to them, and when the blow fell they were only a matter of seconds behind the Sikhs in snatching their rifles and opening fire.

It was this astounding promptitude that saved the situation, beyond a shadow of doubt. The Nishta Khel must have been almost as much taken by surprise as we had been, and those two volleys had the effect of driving every man Jack of them into cover behind the battlements. You don't need telling that, in war, one of the most disconcerting and paralysing experiences possible is the sudden and unexpected loss of the initiative.

## *Mubarikh Day*

That had happened to the Nishta Khel now. They had the whole thing planned out to the last detail, but all their plans had been based on the reasonable assumption that the Nth would be caught absolutely unprepared. Their objective was a wholesale massacre of the entire force, and on the face of it there should have been no more difficulty than in a gang of roughs robbing a feeble old lady. They took it for granted, I suppose, that the Nth, suddenly deprived of every single British Officer, would fall an easy victim, to be rounded up and slaughtered at leisure ; and it must have been a tremendous blow to Shah Baz when he found that, far from being unprepared and off their guard, they were only a matter of seconds behind his own men in opening fire.

Gad ! It was almost as if Milkha Singh had had inside information as to their plans. The next item on the Nishta Khel's programme, apparently, was to get possession of the bodies of the British Officers, for I saw a small body of tribesmen beginning to rush towards us from round the corner of the nearest village. But they were greeted with such a withering enfilade fire from the Mussulman sepoy's—their late guests—that half of them fell dead before they had advanced a dozen yards, whereupon the remainder hurriedly retreated into cover again. Simultaneously with this, the Nth's Dogras came into action from the cliffs above the river-bed. Their job—assigned beforehand by Milkha Singh,

## *Lean Brown Men*

I may say—was to foil the Pathan body-snatchers by getting us to safety. Supported by covering fire from the Sikhs and Mussulmans, a party of about thirty Dogras dashed across the intervening hundred yards or so, and the next thing I knew was being lifted gently but quickly on to a stretcher. Mackworth and I were the only two who were anything like conscious, for although young Drewe was still alive he had a bullet somewhere in his skull, and never came to himself again.

I think the agony of my smashed knee and the general shock of these terrible happenings made me faint for a few minutes. At any rate, when I opened my eyes again I was on my stretcher behind the orchard wall, where the Sikhs were still keeping up a desultory fire upon any Nishta Khel who dared to show his head above the battlements. Some yards away, Milkha Singh, looking meeker and more chinless than ever, was rapidly outlining his plan of campaign to a small group of Indian Officers and N.C.Os., who nodded and grunted approval as the various orders were given. Honestly, you've never seen anything so absurdly cool in your life. They might have been standing about in barracks waiting for Durbar, for all the panic or excitement that was shown. When Milkha Singh dismissed them with a gentle "*Samaj-lié? Bas, ijazat hai!*" away they doubled to their respective companies. Then the Subadar-Major caught sight of me with my eyes open, and came across to me.

## *Mubarikh Day*

He looked very grave, and I truly believe the old man had been weeping, but he conjured up a sufficiently cheerful smile and squatted down beside my stretcher.

"A bad business, *huzoor*," he said, nodding his head towards the bodies of my dead and dying comrades close by, "a terrible business, but all will yet be well, for the dogs are penned inside their village and cannot get out until we choose to retire. We commence our retirement in ten minutes—not by the way we came, for the river-bed would be a death-trap without piquets—but straight back over the high ground from here. I have already sent back the guns and half a company of Dogras to take up a position a thousand yards to the rear. Then the Mussulmans must get back, passing through us, to the same position, while the Sikhs and the remainder of the Dogras hold this wall together. When the next position is ready a gun will fire, and then we shall retire also. Is the plan good, *huzoor*?"

"It is very good, Subadar-Major Sahib," I replied, with sincere admiration. (As a matter of interest, I should like to draw your attention to the fact that Milkha Singh, in this sudden emergency in the year of grace 1876, hit upon the very system of "leap-frog" retirements that I gather is quite the fashion with the army of to-day.) And then it suddenly struck me that perhaps it was I, and not Milkha Singh, who ought to be taking charge of operations. True, I did not belong to the *N*th, but I was a British



## *Lean Brown Men*

Officer, holding the Queen's commission, and as such it seemed my duty to assume command of the force. I said as much to Milkha Singh and tried to get up, but my leg was utterly powerless, and I nearly fainted again with the agony.

Milkha Singh gave me a wry little smile, and gently pushed me back.

"No, Sahib," he said, shaking his head, "you must lie quiet and leave this to me. All will be well, for I have not served in the Regiment for twenty-six years without gaining some knowledge of how these things are done. But now it is time for you to be going, Sahib. See, the stretcher-bearers are coming, and they will carry you and all our casualties back to the next position. Once there, help Subadar Bagh Ali, who commands the Mussulmans, to select a third position yet a thousand yards farther back, to which we Sikhs and Dogras can retire when the time comes."

And with that Milkha Singh shook me by the hand, saluted and left me.

That stretcher journey to the second position was nothing short of hell. The ground was terribly uneven, and the evacuation was carried out at the double for the most part. Fortunately for us, our departure from the orchard synchronized exactly with the retirement of the Mussulmans from their position between the three villages, and the Nishta Khel were too busy trying to hamper their retreat to pay any attention to us. When we had covered about half the distance the Mussulmans caught up with

## *Mubarikh Day*

us. Bagh Ali, their Punjabi subadar, dropped a small escort to protect the stretcher-party, and then doubled on with the remainder of his men to the low ridge selected for our second stand. By the time we ourselves had arrived there the place was already lined with determined sepoys, and the guns were ready for action, one on each flank.

It was no doubt due to what they call the "heat of battle," but, whatever the cause, I was fully conscious and feeling none too bad by now. The panting stretcher-bearers were quickly relieved by fresher men, and all casualties except myself were sent off still farther to the rear, to the position which Bagh Ali had already selected for the next bound. I was supposed to go too, but my blood was up, and I insisted on having my stretcher put down just behind the crest of the ridge so that I could watch the retirement of Milkha Singh's party from Mubarikh. They were more hotly engaged with the enemy than ever, and, as I swept the country with my binoculars, I saw two very disturbing sights. First, a couple of hundred Nishta Khel had managed to work their way under cover right across Milkha Singh's front, and were converging for an assault on his left flank. This manœuvre was plain enough to us from where we were, but the question was—could Milkha Singh see it? And then, just as Bagh Ali and I were taking in this danger and debating whether we could do anything to help, a sepoy close to us gave a little

## *Lean Brown Men*

cry and pointed with his finger to the north. The sight there curdled my blood well and truly, for, on the north bank of the river and about mid-way between Milkha Singh's position and our own, was a veritable *lashkar* of Pathans—five or six hundred of them at least !

No need to ask their intention ; obviously Shah Baz had expected the *Nth* to retire down the river-bed, and this body of tribesmen had been sent there to cut them off. Now that we had chosen to stay on the high ground, they were about to cross the river and come up between Milkha Singh and ourselves.

It looked for a moment as if nothing could save Milkha Singh's detachment. In front of him in the villages was the main body of Nishta Khel. A couple of hundred men were working round his left flank. And now this *lashkar* was coming up on his right rear. The Subadar-Major had well under a hundred and fifty men, all told, while the fighting strength of the Nishta Khel was said to be between two and three thousand.

I tell you, those next moments were about the most agonizing in my life, both mentally and physically. Although I was a casualty and Bagh Ali was, strictly speaking, in command, I felt that he was instinctively relying on me for moral support in whatever decision he took, and that it was up to me to help him out. The whole point was, you see, that it was now time for us to fire the gun as a signal for Milkha Singh's retirement. Once that signal was given, he and

## *Mubarikh Day*

his men would leave the comparative safety of the walled orchard and run for their lives across the open plain. Under the best conditions this must inevitably have been a dangerous and nerve-racking experience, but, now that their way was almost barred by the two converging bodies of Pathans, the peril was multiplied by a thousand. The question was, ought we to fire the gun and let the Subadar-Major hack his way through the fast-closing trap as best he could while we supported him with covering fire, or should we engage the *lashkar* ourselves and try to wipe it out before signalling to Milkha Singh to withdraw?

To make our decision even more difficult, the only way in which we could hope to destroy the *lashkar* was by shooting it up with our mountain guns, and the sound of those would bring Milkha Singh into the open, probably several minutes before we were ready for him!

As it happened, we never reached a decision at all, for the matter was suddenly taken out of our hands.

It has taken some time to explain the situation to you, but actually I don't suppose more than half a minute elapsed between our first sighting the *lashkar* and the firing of the first gun. Neither Bagh Ali nor I gave the order: we were still feverishly debating the subject when the report startled us. It was the gun on the right flank that had fired, and Bagh Ali, stern disciplinarian

## *Lean Brown Men*

that he was, spun round with a savage oath to curse the men who had sealed the Subadar-Major's fate. But the expletive died on his lips, and a groan of amazement rose to mine, as we beheld none other than Mackworth himself directing the fire. He had regained consciousness just as his stretcher was being taken away from that position, and had insisted on being carried to the nearest of his beloved guns. And now he was actually standing—yes, *standing*, but supported by two sepoys—a yard or two below the crest of our ridge, and it had been by his order that the first shell was fired.

He knew nothing, of course, of the deeper significance of his action, for he had been unconscious when Milkha Singh had outlined his plan. All he knew was that five hundred tribesmen were presenting a magnificent target at almost point-blank range, and—well, Mackworth was a gunner! A second later the other gun spoke from the left flank, and when the smoke and dust had cleared away we saw that the situation was saved; for where a minute before had been that formidable *lashkar* there now remained only a ghastly heap of thirty or forty corpses. The rest of the *lashkar* were flying for their lives towards the river-bed. Poor Mackworth, having made this valuable contribution to the day's work, fell forward unconscious again, and was carried to the rear.

His hands cupped about his mouth, Bagh Ali yelled an order to the left-flank gun to engage

## *Mubarikh Day*

the smaller body of Nishta Khel who had by this time almost got round Milkha Singh's flank. The right-hand gun was still shooting at the retreating *lashkar*, and although no more direct hits were scored, its fire served its purpose. Then the left gun got going on its new target, and at the same moment Milkha Singh's party of Sikhs and Dogras came into sight, emerging from the near end of the distant orchard. On they came at a steady double, rifles at the port, old Milkha Singh last of all, with his sword drawn. If it weren't such a hackneyed phrase, I'd say that they carried out the movement as if they were on parade—an almost perfect line, a steady pace, and no panic. They had obviously had some casualties, for several of the men were carrying comrades on their backs, while others bore a second rifle. You know, of course, that during the whole of that day the *N*th lost not a single rifle, and that not one dead or wounded man was left behind? It's wellnigh incredible, and yet it's true: a matter of history.

How long does it take a line of men to double a thousand yards? Ten minutes? Eight? Twelve? Heaven knows; but it seemed like a century to us watching them. The trouble was that we could do so little to help them. The Nishta Khel weren't exposing themselves any more, thanks to our gun-fire, and, although there were a certain number of shots fired from both sides, we really had no target to aim at. The small encircling party on the left flank had taken

## *Lean Brown Men*

shelter in a nullah, and the big *lashkar* was somewhere in the river-bed, out of sight.

Panting for breath, but otherwise in pretty good order, the Sikhs and Dogras reached us at last, and threw themselves down beside their Mussulman comrades. Milkha Singh himself, blown but still calm, came up to where Bagh Ali and I were lying, and rapidly took stock of the situation. Then he gave his orders again. The Sikhs and Dogras, he said, would continue their retirement after a couple of minutes' rest, taking with them all the casualties and both guns. They would occupy the third defensive position as quickly as possible, while Bagh Ali and his Mussulmans held the second against all comers. As before, the signal for the abandonment of the front position would be given by gun-fire. And that was that.

## V

Well, I mustn't take you through the rest of that day minute by minute. In the first place, I myself was allowed to see very little more of the actual fighting, for Milkha Singh insisted on all casualties, whether British or Indian, being kept well in the rear. Seven consecutive positions did the *N*th occupy that day, moving from one to the other so quickly and expeditiously that the enemy could never get round our flanks or even engage us at close quarters from the front.

## *Mubarikh Day*

All through the terrible heat of the day the grand old *Nth* carried on, parched with thirst, choked and blinded with dust—fighting, fighting, fighting, over strange country and against overwhelming odds. I saw Milkha Singh occasionally, though for the most part he was in the forefront of the battle, directing every movement in person. Nothing appeared to worry him, and he showed no sign of nerves. The anomaly of his position never seemed to strike him. Apparently, he didn't think it at all strange that he, an Indian Officer, should be charged with a task that would have been no light matter for the most experienced British colonel. He thought of everything, and never once lost his head—not even when his son, a sepoy in B Company, was killed before his eyes.

By the time the seventh position had been reached the situation was desperate indeed, for the *Nishta Khel* were on us in their hundreds and thousands, in front and on both flanks. Our gun ammunition was expended, and rifle ammunition was running desperately low. The Pathans were pressing closer and closer, and the *Nth* were nearly exhausted with their terrible labours. Casualties were mounting up, and every casualty meant the loss of at least one more man from the firing-line to carry him and his rifle. Personally, I don't mind admitting that I'd given up hope long ago. Milkha Singh's rear-guard action was magnificent, but it wasn't war. The odds were too heavy.



## *Lean Brown Men*

It's lucky that Milkha Singh was either made of sterner stuff, or else was less imaginative than myself, for I still have an unpleasant feeling that if I had been in his position I should have decided by this time that orderly retreat was no longer possible and given the order for *sauve qui peut*. We had retired roughly four miles from Mubarikh, and it had taken us the best part of four hours. We had at least another four miles to go before we should reach the ridge on which Ashton's wing was awaiting us.

In other words, we had done about half our job. Could we, in our present condition, hold out for another four miles?

Impossible.

Better, I thought, to seek a suitable piece of high ground and there sell our lives as dearly as we could.

I sent for Milkha Singh and told him what I thought.

He listened calmly and respectfully, but shook his head. No—he said—we must never let the enemy get behind us, or they would overwhelm us through sheer weight of numbers. Rather keep on retiring by bounds. Besides, he had sent for Ashton Sahib—three runners by different routes—and the reserve wing should be with us in an hour or two.

But, I asked, could we hold out even for one more hour? Could we keep up with this killing pace, with an ever-mounting casualty-list and an ever-decreasing ammunition supply?

## *Mubarikh Day*

Milkha Singh shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "We can but try, *huzoor*," he replied. "The Colonel Sahib would never have given up, and I am in the Colonel Sahib's place now!"

So saying, as if to change the subject, he turned to point out to me the position he had chosen for our eighth stand—yet another of those low parallel ridges which a merciful Nature had provided for us, eleven or twelve hundred yards away.

And then, as I followed his finger, the miracle happened. To me, lying there on my stretcher, the ridge at which he was pointing suddenly seemed to quiver and change shape. At first I put it down to my increasing weakness, but when I had focused my binoculars on it I straightway yelled for joy, for its crest was alive with sepoys, and in their midst I saw a figure in a helmet. It was Ashton, with the left wing of the Regiment, who had reached us a full hour before we could have expected them. The fact of the matter was, as I discovered later, that Ashton had decided earlier in the day that the ridge originally selected for his supporting position was unsatisfactory from the point of view of visibility, and he had moved forward to a place a couple of miles closer to us. Also, he had heard our mountain guns in action long before Milkha Singh's messengers had reached him, and he had consequently been moving cautiously forward to our assistance for the past hour or so.

And that was the end of Mubarikh Day.

## *Lean Brown Men*

Ashton's unexpected arrival not only put new heart into our own poor weary fellows, but it scared the Nishta Khel so badly that they simply broke off the engagement and went home. They couldn't know, for one thing, that Ashton had no more than a wing with him, and we were by this time too close to British territory for them to take any risks. Ashton fired volley after volley into the blue by way of impressing them with his strength, and the ruse was extremely effective, for we had no more trouble from that day, and, after an hour's halt for rest and refreshment, we formed into column in the river-bed and marched back to Dwazám, covered only by a small tactical rearguard. We got there soon after seven—just about fifteen hours after we had set out !

Fifteen hours ! Dear God, it seemed more like fifteen years !

Well, you know the rest, of course. You know what subsequently happened to the Nishta Khel—how General Cardus fell on them with his entire brigade, razed Mubarikh to the ground, captured and hanged Shah Baz, and more than decimated his tribe. You know that the Nth took a leading part in that expedition. You know that Milkha Singh, that queer old Chinless Wonder, was given the Indian Order of Merit, made a *Sirdar Bahadur*, and promoted to the honorary rank of Captain, carrying with it a very special pension when he retired from the Service a few months later. And you may or may not know that not only India, but the whole

## *Mubarikh Day*

world, went mad when the full story came out—and forgot all about it in less than a week.

\* \* \*

“And yourself, sir?” asked Adrian after a pause, expressing the unspoken question of us all.

Mr. Thackeray laughed. “Gad, sir, you didn’t come here to talk about me,” he replied. “They had my leg off in Gulzai a day or two after, and only just in time too, I believe. They gave me a bit of a pension, and when I came home I took up tea-broking and carried on at that for the next five-and-forty years. Since I retired I’ve been existing here—gardening, sleeping, eating, drinking. . . .

“Which reminds me—look at the sun, dam—dash it!—Daisy! *Daisy!*—Where the—I mean, where’s that blast—dashed old—old—ah, there she is! Gad, she’s bringing it!”



## *Book III*

### ADRIAN'S DREAM

#### I

MY brother-in-law, Adrian Wise, is really the teller of this tale, but it would be quite useless to suggest that he himself should write it down—and, if he did, it would probably read like an extract from a Summary of Evidence. My sister Sheila swears that even his pre-nuptial letters reminded her of parade-states sprinkled with Ella Wheeler Wilcox, and Adrian himself admits that his literary style is incapable of rising above the jargon of official telegrams and memoranda.

It must not be inferred from this, however, that Adrian is one of those strong, silent men about whom we used to hear so much. On the contrary, he is a cheery, rather loquacious soul, fond of good company, and equally at home in the barrack and the boudoir, as he puts it. And, although it naturally goes against the grain to speak well of one's "in-laws," I must confess that I have always found him a remarkably decent and sensible fellow, and I am the first to admit that Sheila might very easily have afflicted me with a far less desirable brother-in-law. But the

## *Lean Brown Men*

chief point that I wish to make is this ; that, whatever else he may be, Adrian is certainly neither a loony nor a liar, and I for one have unbounded confidence in his veracity. I feel that it is only right to give him this unsolicited testimonial in view of the rather queer nature of the story which follows.

Perhaps I had better explain, too, how this tale came to be told at all, for in the ordinary course of events Adrian is by no means given to yarning about his past, and, had it not been for the episode of Sheila's dream, I feel certain that the story of Adrian's dream would never have come to light. After our visit to Mr. Thackeray the three of us returned to Sussex, and a few days afterwards the local race-meeting commenced. Naturally we went to it—not that any of us knew or cared a great deal about horse-racing, but it was “something to do,” and we therefore did it.

It was the night after the first day of the meeting, I think, that Sheila had her dream. I was a few minutes late for breakfast the next morning, and entered the room in time to hear Adrian muttering darkly of “divorce, and a dam' good hiding into the bargain the next time it happens” —threats which evoked a ripple of silvery laughter from my sister. On investigation it turned out that Sheila had been visited during the night by one of those pseudo-prophetic visions (not at all uncommon at such seasons) in which one sees a certain horse and jockey triumphantly winning a race. So far, so good ; but Sheila's dream had

## *Adrian's Dream*

been so wonderfully vivid and thrilling that she had been impelled to drive an elbow with all her force into her husband's most sensitive rib, at the same time awakening him with shrill cries of "Pink wins! Pink wins!" Having heard the evidence, I felt bound to agree with Adrian that such conduct constituted clear grounds for divorce.

Pressed for details, my sister confessed that the name of the victorious animal had not been revealed to her, but she insisted that it had been a grey beast with a Roman nose, ridden by a jockey clad "all in pink." ("What, boots and all?" murmured her husband, unkindly.) When we reached the race-course later on, a search of the book of words made it clear that there was only one grey horse being ridden in pink that afternoon—an outsider named Pythagoras (rather aptly, it seemed to me, since its frame appeared to consist largely of right angles). Being a complete agnostic in the matter of signs and portents, I refused to risk any money on this geometrical creature; and, strangely enough, Sheila herself merely laughed at the coincidence and firmly declined to wager on it. But Adrian (who secretly trusts his wife's intuitions to a far greater extent than he would ever admit) insisted on staking no less than ten pounds on Pythagoras, at the admittedly tempting price of 33 to 1. It only remains to record that the favourite won the race quite comfortably, with Pythagoras an indifferent fifth. And that, for the moment, was that.



## *Lean Brown Men*

It was after supper that evening that Sheila and I began twitting Adrian on his well-deserved loss. From playful banter the conversation developed into a half-serious discussion on dreams in general. I, personally, adhered to my complete unbelief in dream-omens. Sheila said she had always been told that one should "reverse one's dreams," whatever that may mean. Adrian said he wasn't so sure, adding rather bashfully that once upon a time a dream had saved his life. This sounded interesting, and we very tactfully drew him out.

Here, then, is the story of Adrian's dream.

Once upon a time (Adrian began), though you may not believe it, I was a horrid little pink-faced subaltern, just hatched out from the Cadet College at Quetta. That was in the spring of 1919, after the Armistice but before the Peace, and, being young and blood-thirsty, I was as sick as mud at having missed the War and half hoped that the Armistice would fizzle out and that I might yet get a whack at the Boche or the Turk. I'd been posted to the Mth Piffers, but they were in Palestine at the time, and for some reason or other, which I never quite fathomed, instead of being ordered to report to their depot at Jullundur, I got packed off to a Punjabi depot at Jhelum.

I was there for a few weeks, learning the ropes and trying to get my tongue round a bit of ele-

## *Adrian's Dream*

mentary Urdu, and I was just wondering how on earth I should manage to get to my own regiment, when the Third Afghan War broke out and there was a squeal throughout India for officer reinforcements for the battalions mixed up in it, most of them being frightfully under strength. So a few days later, the Punjabis having no particular use for me, I was pushed off to the frontier and posted, on loan, to the Jandhiala Sikhs.

Needless to say, I was very full of myself, getting on active service so soon—I'd been commissioned just about two months!—and, incidentally, I was very thankful to feel that if I couldn't fight with my own regiment I had at least been lucky enough to strike a fine crowd like the Jandhialas.

I'm afraid I can't truthfully say that the Jandhialas altogether reciprocated this feeling. I had had a sort of idea, I think, that as they were hard up for officers of their own they'd be glad to have the loan of a regular subaltern from so famous a battalion as the Nth Piffers. Not a bit of it! All they wanted was rifle-fodder, so to speak, and they took very little trouble to conceal the fact that they'd have preferred something a little older and more experienced than myself. Poor old Jandhialas—they'd had a tough time! Three and a half years of France, Gallipoli, and Mespot, and now caught up in a brand-new frontier scrap. They had only arrived at Karachi a fortnight before, poor devils, thinking they were bound for some nice, comfy, down-country peace-

## *Lean Brown Men*

station, where they could lick their wounds and get their long-overdue furlough—instead of which they were greeted with orders for Tank, of all places in the world ! You know Tank, Marcus ? It's in the Derajat—South Waziristan, you know—and just about the most poisonous spot on the Frontier. Gosh ! they were fed-up, I can tell you. Another regiment might have piled arms and refused to go, but not the old Jandhialas.

They had exactly three British Officers with them when they arrived in Tank : the colonel, old Bill McCrossan, who'd been due for pension in 1914 and was still commanding 'em five years later—a grand old savage, with a face like a stained-glass window and the vocabulary of a bargee ; then there was an extremely efficient, but unpleasant, senior captain called Rawson, who was combining the jobs of second-in-command, adjutant, and quartermaster ; and another fairly senior bird named Quick, who was commanding all four companies. When I reported my arrival they all nodded grimly at each other and at me, and Quick lived up to his name by unloading one of his companies on me almost before I'd had time to get my breath. Mercifully, it was the best company, with the highest percentage of old soldiers, and an amazing old subadar, Mit Singh. Heaven only knows what I'd have done with a company that wasn't capable of running itself more or less without my aid !

Within a week of my arrival orders came for one company to go out to a place called Haghazia,

## *Adrian's Dream*

about twenty miles away, and take over the fort there from the Militia, who were being hurriedly withdrawn and replaced by regular troops before they all deserted and joined their pals on the other side of the border. Mine being the only company that boasted a British Officer of its own, it was naturally detailed for the job, so off we pushed one stinking hot night and took over the fort next day. And there was your sweet little Adrian, aged nineteen years and two months, with roughly nine weeks' commissioned service, commanding a real mud-fort at the back of beyond, twenty miles from the nearest reinforcements and about two hundred yards from the border, with no very clear idea of what he was supposed to do, still less of how he was supposed to do it.

In a way, of course, it was great fun. The funny old fort tickled my young imagination no end, and I thought I was the devil of a *bahadur* to be commanding such a show as that. I used to walk up and down the battlements like an admiral on his bridge, and sweep the surrounding country with my binoculars for any sign of the enemy. Actually, there was never any fear of the Afghans trying to get through in that part of the frontier, but the local tribesmen were on the war-path and had their tails pretty high in the air as a result of the Wana show, where they'd got away with ever so many rifles and rounds of ammunition.

But all that "romantic" side of the business

## *Lean Brown Men*

was sheer make-believe, like a kid playing soldiers, and most of the time I felt miserably useless and inefficient—as indeed I was. Dear knows what would have happened but for old Mit Singh : *he* ran the show, though he was so brimful of tact that I hardly realized it at the time. He was a grand old fellow, about six foot three and colossally broad, with the biggest and whitest beard I've ever seen, even on a Sikh. Like the Colonel, he was years overdue for his pension, but had stayed on all through the War and had ripened with the years, like old port, instead of going to seed as some of 'em do. Yet, although he ran the show and made all the *bandobast* for everything, he never stirred a finger without my permission, and he had a simply marvellous knack of putting just the right orders into my mouth without making me feel that I was being dictated to.

Hell's bells ! I still go all hot and sweaty when I think of Haghazai. The playing-at-soldiers side of life soon wore thin, and the climate and the discomfort and the sense of my own uselessness began to tell on me. I was frantically lonely, apart from everything else : there wasn't another soul in the place who could speak a word of English, and my knowledge of Urdu was—well—typical of a second lieutenant with less than three months' service. Besides, Urdu wasn't much good with the Jandhialas—the blighters all spoke the broadest Punjabi, and they'd been used to officers who could speak it too. Of course,

## *Adrian's Dream*

according to regulations, Urdu is supposed to be the official language for the whole of the Indian Army, but little details like that didn't worry the Jandhialas, bless 'em! However, Mit Singh stretched a point or two for my benefit, and we got along somehow. Looking back on it all, I can't help seeing how ludicrous the whole business was—a miserable little wart like myself trying to run a show which, even in peace-time, would probably have been a major's command at least.

## II

Haghazai was very much like any other small frontier post, I suppose. The fort was rectangular in shape, about a hundred yards by eighty, with twenty-foot walls and a low tower, or bastion, in each corner. Some five feet below the top of the walls ran what I called the battlements—a platform ten or twelve feet broad, which also formed the roof of the men's quarters below. The walls were of mud, loopholed, naturally, and the fort was sited so as to give a pretty good field of fire in every direction except the north—of which more anon. The centre courtyard was given up to various storerooms, mule-lines, and so forth.

Thirty or forty yards to the north of the fort, and running parallel to the north wall, there stood (rather surprisingly, I thought) an ancient but

## *Lean Brown Men*

perfectly serviceable Military Works rest-house—a spacious, mud-built bungalow with a flat roof, which contained a certain amount of civilized furniture. I never discovered exactly what it was doing there, but I need hardly say that I took it over as my own quarters as soon as I arrived. The so-called officers' quarters in the fort itself were too ghastly for words—tumble-down, bug-infested, crawling with scorpions, and unbearably hot and stuffy. The Militia bloke whom I'd relieved had been living in the rest-house himself and advised me to do likewise, and I'd have been a fool not to take his tip. Even that was bad enough, but it was streets ahead of the fort.

Mit Singh quite approved of this arrangement too, but he was firm on one point, namely, that I must move into the fort every evening at dusk and remain there till after dawn. That was only common sense, after all, for, although there were at first no signs of active warfare in those parts, Fort Haghazai stood literally within a stone's-throw of the frontier, and the local savages were known to be absolutely seething with bloody-mindedness. There were a few strands of barbed wire round the fort and bungalow, but not enough to deter any Pathan who was set on getting through, and if I'd slept in the rest-house it would have meant mounting a special guard there for my benefit, which was out of the question. So every evening at sunset or thereabouts all my kit was shifted across to the fort, and I myself fol-

## *Adrian's Dream*

lowed as soon as I'd had my dinner, such as it was.

All this, by the way, was in the month of June, and I needn't tell you what that part of the world is like at that time of year. Just to give you some sort of idea, I'll mention that at Tank, where our headquarters were, the shade temperature topped the 130° mark twice that month, and for days *and nights* on end during one period the thermometer didn't drop below 118°. Haghazai was at least as bad as that; probably worse, for in Tank they had a few punkahs and an ice-factory, while we had neither.

Heat? Hell's pit! I've never known anything like it, before or since. Why on earth we didn't all die of heat-stroke is a complete mystery, yet we only had three or four cases the whole time I was there. And the flies—my stars, the place was black with them, and you couldn't get a forkful of food to your mouth without a million or two of the brutes settling on it. And at night, while the common house-fly was snatching a few hours' well-earned rest, out came the hordes of mosquitoes and sand-flies, and all Mr. Keating's hierarchy of bugs, fleas, moths, and beetles, as he so elegantly puts it.

However, I'm wandering from the point, I'm afraid. I hope I've said enough to convince you that Haghazai bore mighty little resemblance to Buckingham Palace or Ye Olde Rose Pleasaunce at Meadowsweet Hall, and to explain why I slept every night naked but for a towel, and my bed



## *Lean Brown Men*

swathed in mosquito-netting, on the upper storey or "battlements" of the fort. Down below in the courtyard, the atmosphere was like a super-heated Turkish bath with something wrong with the drains, for you can't crowd a couple of hundred sweaty, *ghi*-fed Sikhs (not to mention thirty or forty mules and camels) into a confined space like that without raising a suspicion of a niff. Even up on the battlements there was no air to speak of, and it's a bit of a euphemism to say that I "slept" there. I used to lie awake for hours, sweating like a bull and drenching myself and my bedding with tepid water, and fanning myself with a venerable copy of *La Vie* which some former warrior had left behind in the rest-house. Towards dawn it would sometimes get a few degrees cooler, and then I might snatch a couple of hours' sleep of sorts, if I was lucky.

Well, one night when we'd been there about a fortnight and I was beginning to wonder how much longer I'd be able to last out, I was so utterly washed-out and weary that not all the heat and bugs in Asia could have kept me awake, and I dropped off to sleep completely exhausted. It wasn't the kind of sleep that does you any good, if you know what I mean: it was really more like a trance or coma, and I started in at once on a whole series of jumbled dreams.

I was absolutely overwrought—that was the truth of it—and I was told afterwards that I'd been tossing about and muttering in my sleep to

## *Adrian's Dream*

such an extent that a passing sentry sent for the Sub-Assistant Surgeon to come and have a look at me, fearing that I was delirious. The S.A.S., however, decided that it was merely nightmare, so I was left alone. Heaven knows what I was dreaming about at first, but later on (about 2 a.m., as I discovered afterwards) things began to come into focus, so to speak, and the patchwork of dreams took on a definite pattern.

It's difficult to describe—dashed difficult—but have you ever had one of those remarkable “double-barrelled” dreams, in which *you dream that you are asleep*? Know what I mean? You sort of float out of your body and see yourself lying asleep—a rum business altogether. Well, that's what I did that night. I seemed to float away from my bed to a point of vantage somewhere in mid-air, and by looking down I could see the whole of the fort laid out like a plan, and my white mosquito-net nestling against the parapet on the battlements on the south side. There had been a half-moon, but, although it hadn't actually set, it had gone behind the hills to the west. It was a clear, starlit night, however, and I could make out everything pretty clearly: the sentries peering over the walls, the rows of nearly naked sepoy stretched out on the mud floors of the battlements, the lines of tethered animals in the courtyard below.

I want you to understand, if you can, that this wasn't quite like an ordinary dream. It was astoundingly clear and stationary, and every-

## *Lean Brown Men*

thing "stayed put," instead of changing shape and position as generally happens in dreams. It was for all the world as if I really *had* left my body and was looking down upon the whole scene. I couldn't actually see my own sleeping body, of course, because of the mosquito-net, but I knew it was there. Still, as usually is the case in even the clearest dream, there was just one thing wrong, and that puzzled me no end : I could see the faces of several of the sleeping sepoys, and they appeared to me to be Dogras instead of Sikhs.

And then, all of a sudden, a slight movement attracted my attention—not in the fort itself, but on the roof of the rest-house thirty or forty yards away. My heart missed several beats and I held my breath as I peered more closely and made out the shadowy figure of a man, in dirty white clothes, cautiously wriggling his way across the flat roof in the direction of the fort. I had never yet seen a Pathan sniper in the flesh, but now I knew instinctively that this was one. Slowly, like a snake, he wormed his way to the edge of the roof, and then, feeling behind him, he dragged into view a long and villainous-looking jezail. That detail struck me as being queer too, because I'd heard that nearly every Pathan owns a modern rifle nowadays.

In a flash it dawned upon me what was going to happen. From the roof of the rest-house, it seemed, this parishioner could overlook a part of the fort, and he was about to take a pot-shot into

## *Adrian's Dream*

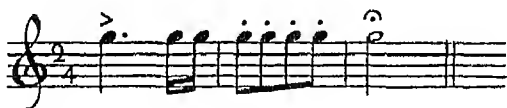
our sanctuary. Nor was there the least room for doubt as to what his target would be, for my white mosquito-net gleamed horribly clearly through the darkness and marked quite unmistakably the resting-place of the one and only officer. (This story wouldn't wash to-day, since every sepoy has a net issued to him and is made to use it, but the Jandhialas hadn't any at that time.) I simply can't describe my sensations—I wanted to shout and warn the sentry, who was obstinately looking in the wrong direction, over the west wall, at the moment, but in my “disembodied” state I seemed to have no power of speech—or, indeed, of doing anything at all except look on. The suspense was simply unbearable: can you imagine it, I wonder? It sounds dam' silly, I know, but there was I, doomed apparently to watch myself being shot, and powerless to do anything about it!

And then another peculiar thing happened.

One of the sleeping sepoy slowly got up from his resting-place half-way along the north wall of the fort—that is, more or less opposite my bed—and stretched himself wearily. I think he was going to get himself a drink of water, for in one hand he held a little brass *lota*. But before he could move off in the direction of the water-tanks, he happened to glance over the wall towards the rest-house. At that very moment the sniper on the roof made a slight movement with one arm, and the Dogra spotted it. I saw him gaze intently into the darkness for a moment, and then

## *Lean Brown Men*

he quickly stooped down and felt for something near his bedding. I was expecting to see him pick up his rifle, and wondered anxiously whether he might yet be able to save me by getting his shot in first. But, to my surprise, when he straightened himself again it was a bugle that he had in his hand, and not a rifle. Drawing a breath, he put it to his lips and blew a call—or rather a quick, rhythmical succession of eight high G's, in 2-4 time.



Then things followed pretty quickly. The whole fort sprang to life, and I saw the sentry at the corner swing round to the north as if by instinct. Then, almost simultaneously, two shots rang out, one from the rest-house, the other from the sentry's rifle, fired through a loophole. But the damage was done, and the young Dogra bugler—I had a clear view of his face then—fell to the ground, shot through the head.

Poor devil—he'd been standing right in the line of fire between the sniper and my bed, and had saved my life at the cost of his own.

## III

Now, this is where we have to be careful not to get muddled. Remember, please, that this in-

## *Adrian's Dream*

cident of the sniper and the bugler didn't *happen* : it was simply the climax of my dream, which came to an abrupt conclusion just as the bugler fell dead. At that instant, I ceased to be a disembodied spectator of the scene poised in mid-air, and awoke to find myself a very hot and badly bothered subaltern back in his bed under the mosquito-net.

For a few seconds I just lay there gasping, trying to get the hang of things, for the dream (or vision, rather) had been so terribly realistic that I couldn't understand at first why Fort Haghazai was still and silent, instead of in a state of alarm and confusion. Still dazed, I put my eye to a hole in the mosquito-net and squinted across to the opposite wall, where the young Dogra should be lying dead : all I could see was a line of peacefully sleeping sepoy, laid out like mahseer at Tangrot. Then a sentry passed my bed and I glanced up into his face : it was a Sikh whose name and face I knew quite well ; in fact, only the day before I'd given him two extra guards at Mit Singh's instigation.

You must understand, of course, that I did all these things ten times more quickly than I can tell you about them. I suppose the interval between my waking and the passing of the Sikh sentry wasn't more than fifteen or twenty seconds all told, and following immediately upon that it occurred to me to see for myself whether the sniping episode that I'd dreamt about would really be feasible or not : in other words, whether

## *Lean Brown Men*

the roof of the rest-house was visible from where I was lying. I had slept in roughly the same position for several nights past and had never noticed this point, but there had been nothing to make me interested in such a possibility, and it now flashed through my mind that it would be simply asking for trouble to sleep in such a place if, by any chance, my bed *could* be seen from the roof.

I was just going to lift my mosquito-net to investigate this question, when a queer sort of alarm-signal started ringing silently in my mind. Rum thing—I was still only half-awake really, and the brain was far from active in the ordinary sense of the word, and yet some peculiar instinct warned me that something was very wrong, and that if I raised that mosquito-net it would undoubtedly be the last movement I should ever make. All of a rush I became absolutely certain that there *was* a sniper on that roof, and that he *could* see my net and was probably even now preparing to draw a bead on it.

Mark you, this wasn't just a case of getting panicky and thinking that "perhaps" these things were so, or of fearing "lest" they might be so; I *knew* they were so, and the certainty grew stronger every half-second. I couldn't have been more certain if the whole blinking place had been flood-lit and I had actually seen the fellow cuddling his rifle to his shoulder. I *knew* for a positive fact that it was only a matter of seconds now before a bullet came crashing into my bed,

## *Adrian's Dream*

and that unless I did something about it eftsoons or right speedily that same bullet would stand a good chance of killing, or at least causing grievous bodily hurt to, Second-Lieutenant Adrian B. Wise.

Question was, what to do? If I shouted and raised a hullabaloo, the sniper would probably let off a quick magazineful before slinging his hook. If I lifted the net and got out of bed in the ordinary way, he'd be bound to spot the movement and pot me as I emerged. There was only one thing for it: I must slide very gently out of bed on the off-side—that is, the side nearest the south wall, away from the rest-house—and crawl into cover as quickly as I could. Even then I wasn't sure that the swine wouldn't see my naked white body against the dark background, and for the first and last time in my life I wished I were a brown man. Or, better still, a black one!

The poor old heart was thumping nineteen to the dozen as I very gingerly untucked the net on the far side of the bed and lowered myself to the ground. Then I slowly and cautiously wormed my way along the bottom of the wall towards the south-west bastion, where the nearest sentry was.

Quite mad, wasn't I? Absolutely bughouse, when you come to think of it. Would *you* have risked making an utter B.F. of yourself like that, just because you *felt* there was something wrong?

I wonder.

I remember realizing in the middle of my crawl



## *Lean Brown Men*

what an almighty ass I'd look if the whole thing turned out to be a mare's nest. What would the men say at their sahib crawling about naked on the battlements at two o'clock in the morning, just because he'd had a bad dream? . . . And then, just as I was wondering what on earth I'd say to the sentry when I reached him, *it happened*. A flash and a crack from the rest-house, and a *phut* of dried mud and dust a foot or two behind me! And then the balloon went up, as you might say.

Oh yes, they got him all right. No flies on the good old Jandhialas, believe me—in the metaphorical sense, at any rate! Actually, the sentry in the north-west corner had spotted Brother Pukhtoon about a minute before he'd fired, but, being a wily old soldier, instead of raising a shindy and alarming his quarry he'd very quietly trained a Lewis-gun on him through a loophole, and was just on the point of popping-off when the other man fired. Brother Pukhtoon had nine bullets in him when we got to him, and was as dead as a drain-pipe.

*His* shot? Oh, clean through my mosquito-net and gone to earth *via* the pillow! A pretty shot for a moonless night, even if the range was nothing much.

But that wasn't by any means the end of the business and I'm afraid the sequel is even more difficult to stomach than the part I've told you already.

That blew over pretty quickly, all things con-

## *Adrian's Dream*

sidered. To tell the truth, quite apart from not wanting to be disbelieved, I couldn't even explain matters to Mit Singh, for the rather pathetic reason that I didn't know what the Urdu for "dream" was, and he and the company just took it for granted, I suppose, that it was nothing but a pure fluke that I should have been out of bed when the bullet arrived. Nor did I feel, somehow, that a detailed account of my vision would go down well with the Powers That Be, to whom I had to send an official report on the matter, so I merely gave them a very bald outline of the main facts of the shooting and let it go at that. The news brought old McCrossan and a whole swarm of brass-hats out to Haghazai, but they were far too busy being wise after the event, and pointing out what a suicidal lunatic I'd been to put my bed in such an exposed position, to inquire how it came about that I hadn't been plugged. Far from congratulating me on my escape, they emphasized that I was dashed lucky to be alive at all, and hinted darkly that it would have been no great loss to King George, and none at all to the Jandhiala Sikhs, if the bullet had found its billet. The Political Agent, I remember, went so far as to sympathize with the dead Pathan, whom he identified as a perfectly peaceful and law-abiding citizen who wouldn't hurt a fly, and who had been lured to his death by my blank-blank carelessness! I've learned since, of course, that Political Agents always talk like that.

Which things being so, I was rather glad that

## *Lean Brown Men*

I'd kept my mouth shut about the dream, though you may be sure I put in a lot of private thinking about it all. The more I pondered, the rummer it seemed, but however much I chewed the matter over in my mind I couldn't get any nearer to an explanation. It was all very uncanny, but apparently quite inexplicable.

Well, in due course my company was relieved at Haghazai and we trekked back to Tank, and I hung about there doing odd jobs for the next two or three months, until I suddenly went down with a delightful combination of malignant malaria and dysentery. I was bunged into the local apology for a hospital and went through several kinds of hell, but eventually I got well enough to be put on a hospital-train and evacuated to 'Pindi, which was the base for the operations. There I lived in what seemed to me to be the seventh heaven of luxury in the special war hospital that they'd rigged up in the Circuit House—a comfy bed, electric fans, minced chicken, cold drinks, and a perfectly fizzing crowd of Australian nursing sisters to look after me, and everything else that a part-worn, war-weary Lean Brown Man of the Frontier could desire. They soon had me on my legs again, and in due course I was packed off to another hospital at Gharial, in the Murree hills, where the coolth and the smell of pine-trees and some even fizzier nurses more or less completed the cure. Still, even then I wasn't considered quite ready to start fighting for King and Country

## *Adrian's Dream*

again, so I was pushed yet another thousand feet or so higher up, to Changla Gali, where they had a sort of convalescent home for officers.

Soon after I arrived, I read in the papers that my own long-lost battalion, the *N*th Piffers, had at last got back from Palestine, and that made me determined to join them as early as I possibly could. The Jandhialas were a grand crowd, of course, but I naturally wanted to get to the battalion that I really belonged to, else I was afraid I'd lose my chance for good and all. According to regulations, I was still on the books of the Jandhialas, and I was supposed to rejoin them immediately I was passed fit, but, having other views on the matter, I wrote a polite chit to the Colonel of the *N*th, explaining who I was and asking if it could be arranged for me to be reposted to them on leaving Changla Gali. Back came a very civil note from the Old Man, saying that he was trying to arrange matters, and a few days later this was followed by a letter from "Tiger" Bunce, who was adjutant in those days, to the effect that the Colonel had wangled the business with Army Headquarters and that I was to report to the *N*th as soon as the Medical Board would let me get away. He added that, as I presumably had a good deal of time on my hands just then, he was sending me copies of the Regimental History and Standing Orders, with the contents of which I was urged to make myself familiar. Sure enough, the books arrived by the next post.

## *Lean Brown Men*

Now, reading matter happened to be just the one thing I was short of at Changla Gali, so it wasn't long before I was dipping my beak into the books which "Tiger" had so opportunely sent. I tackled the Standing Orders first, that being the smaller volume, and I read right through it in bed that night. I was just going to put it down and turn out my light, when I noticed that at the end there was a sort of appendix, giving all the bugle-calls used in the battalion. These interested me mildly, for I'd once been a bugler in the O.T.C. at school, and I could read music well enough to be able to hum them to myself. Most of them, of course, were just the ordinary calls in universal use throughout the Army—Reveille, Retreat, Lights Out, and so forth—but at the top of the page stood the Regimental Call of the *N*th Piffers—you know, the call that is prefixed to every "universal" call to show which battalion the latter refers to.

Well, the moment I clapped eyes on it I recognized it. Believe me or not, it was that same rhythmic sequence of eight high G's that my "dream-bugler" had played that night at Hag hazai :

*TUM . . . titty, tum-tum-tum-tum-TUM . . .*

## IV

If you want to realize how this discovery shook me you must remember that until that very

## *Adrian's Dream*

moment I hadn't had the remotest idea what my battalion's regimental call might be, for I'd never met them and naturally I hadn't troubled to find out such a trivial detail as that. So, you see, there was no question of the call that I'd heard in my dream being a matter of subconscious memory, or "suggestion," or whatever the pundits call it. I'm not the least bit psychic or superstitious or anything of that sort, but somehow this coincidence seemed too remarkable to *be* a coincidence, and it will probably strike you that way too.

There was no question of my being mistaken either—that call is unique throughout the British and Indian Armies, and so far as I know there isn't another unit in the world whose regimental call consists entirely of high G's, without a single other note. If it had been any ordinary combination of notes I'd have been prepared to admit that perhaps I'd made a mistake, but there was no possibility of a mistake here. Funnily enough, that night at Haghazai I'd realized that the bugler was blowing a regimental call—probably meaning to follow it up with the "Alarm"—and I'd attributed the fact of the call being all on one note to another of those curious "wrong details" that always occur in dreams, like the fact of the bugler being a Dogra instead of a Sikh.

Anyway, there it was, and I was left face to face with the astounding thought that I had had my life saved not merely by a phantom bugler,

## *Lean Brown Men*

but apparently by a bugler of my own regiment ! And then it occurred to me to wonder, naturally enough, whether the *N*th had ever been stationed at Haghazai. I knew that in the early days of the Punjab Frontier Force these old Piffer regiments had lived almost entirely on the border, and there was a good chance of their having struck Haghazai at some time or other. It was getting late, but I was too het-up to think of sleep, so I sat up in bed again and got down to the Regimental History.

I don't know if you've ever studied a regimental history, but if you have you'll know that it's the sort of book that can best be described as a "curiosity of literature." Given a spot of imagination, there's the material for a novel on almost any page, but you hardly ever find the slightest attempt made to add a tiny bit of colour or even literary style. The most thrilling events are all chronicled in the driest and most matter-of-fact manner imaginable, and the stories are more remarkable for what they leave unsaid than for the information they actually give. "The Regiment did this—," "The Regiment did that—," and never a blinking word of explanation as to how, or even why, it was done. I tell you, it's simply exasperating at times, this lack of detail. In the old days, you know, a Piffer battalion would often be sent off into the blue for months at a time on a sort of roving commission, and anyone who knows what an almighty song-and-dance it is nowadays to move a com-

## *Adrian's Dream*

pany ten miles to a training-camp can't help being puzzled to death as to how they used to do things in the Year Dot.

However, I mustn't start off on the shortcomings of regimental histories now, or we'll never get to bed. But, to show what I mean, here's an example connected with my story. You remember I was hunting through our history that night to see if I could find any mention of Haghazai: well, I turned up the index and found no less than eleven references to it, spread over a period of fifty years or more. It was quite clear, then, that the regiment knew all there was to be known about that part of the world, but I must admit I wasn't prepared for the shock I got when I looked up the first reference. That was 'way back in the eighteen-fifties, and there was a paragraph of about half a dozen lines, reading something like this:

On October 6th, the Regiment arrived at the junction of the Birzai and Nurumba valleys, which Colonel Cardus considered would be a suitable site for a fort. A fort was accordingly built there, and named Fort Haghazai after the neighbouring village of that name, and the Regiment marched on through the Birzai Valley on November 23rd, leaving Lieutenant Gately and E Company as garrison for the new fort.

You see what I mean? Could anything be more exasperating? *A fort was accordingly built*—heavens above, *can* you imagine the modern infantry battalion building a fort nowadays? *How* did they build it? *Why* did they build it?



## *Lean Brown Men*

Where did they get their materials from? Where did their rations come from? Devil a word about anything like that—"Colonel Cardus considered" it a bright scheme, so "a fort was accordingly built"!

But these are afterthoughts, I must admit. At the time, of course, I was thrilled to the marrow to find that my regiment had actually built the place where I'd had my curious dream, so I swallowed my impatience for details and went on hunting up the references given in the index. The next two weren't very important—just reliefs of the original garrison and so forth—and then came a gap of more than a dozen years, during which the *N*th were presumably besporting themselves on some other part of the frontier.

Adrian got up from his chair and strode across to the book-shelf beside the fireplace.

"Pray note the model adjutant," he grinned, returning with a battered green volume. "Can't bear to be parted from his Regimental History even when he's home on leave, and is prepared to give chapter and verse for everything he says, like a babu in a law-court. Now then, Sheila, my poppet, you've browsed through this book more than once in your capacity of model adjutant's helpmeet, so I suppose you've guessed——"

My sister nodded gravely. "Yes, darling," she replied softly, "though, naturally, I never knew——"

## *Adrian's Dream*

"Of course not—how could you? Well, Marcus, for your especial benefit, then, I will now take the liberty of reading a short passage from the history of the *Nth* Piffers for the year of grace eighteen hundred and sixty-eight."

The helpmeet coughed deprecatingly. "Sixty-nine, precious," she amended, gently.

"Eh?"

"Sixty-nine, angel. Don't you remember they were up the Kurram most of sixty-eight, and marched down to Dera Ghazi Khan the following cold weather?"

Adrian goggled at her. "Bless my soul, woman—do you mean to say you know this perishing book by heart?"

"Oh, no—not quite, Adrian darling; not the last part, 'cos the Great War was so *dreadfully* confusing, wasn't it?"

For a few moments poor Adrian gazed at her open-mouthed. Then, with a comical look of despair, he shrugged his shoulders and opened the book.

"Eighteen sixty-nine it is," he announced resignedly, having found the page, "and here is that fourth mention of Fort Haghazai, Marcus, which I found that night at Changla Gali. Will you read it, or shall I? Very well, then: the heading of the paragraph isn't sensational—just *Events of the 18th/19th March; 1869*. (I'm so sorry, by the way, that I can't make the date tally with that of my dream, which took place in June,

## *Lean Brown Men*

if you remember, but that can't be helped.) Anyway, here is the paragraph itself:

On the 18th March, the Dogra Company (Ensign Rupert L. Perceval) took over garrison duties at Fort Haghazai, relieving a company of the K'th Piffers. The ensuing night was marked by an incident terminating in the death of No. 3373, Bugler Ishar Ram. Shortly after two o'clock in the morning, the sleeping garrison was awakened by the sound of Ishar Ram's bugle, followed almost immediately by a shot from the roof of the newly-erected Rest-house, which struck the unfortunate bugler in the head, killing him instantly. It is a melancholy satisfaction to record that the marksman was shot dead by a sentry whilst endeavouring to beat a retreat.

“That's all, I'm afraid. Not a word of conjecture, you notice, as to how Ishar Ram came to spot the blighter, or what the said blighter was aiming at, or anything like that—only the bare facts of the case. I need hardly say that I fancy *I* could supply all sorts of missing details, and if there was any way of settling the matter this side of the grave, I'd bet a month's pay to a bent kipper that our young and doubtless bewhiskered friend, Ensign Rupert L. Perceval, was sleeping in just the very spot selected half a century later by Second-Lieutenant Adrian B. Wise, and that he was lying under a mosquito-net, if they had such things in those days. And I'd lay even heavier odds that Ensign Rupert L. Perceval, like Second-Lieutenant Adrian B. Wise, shifted his bed to the lee of the north wall of the fort, and slept there for the remainder of his stay in Haghazai!

“And finally, dear hearts, three remarkably

### *Adrian's Dream*

pregnant and well-defined facts emerge from this pleasant little chat that we've been having. Firstly, that it is most imprudent, to say the least of it, to proceed on active service without having your mosquito-net dyed khaki. Secondly, that if any lady or gent dares to quote the poet Shakespeare on the subject of 'more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,' he or she will receive a thick ear and/or a decree nisi, according to sex and degree of affinity. And lastly, that I could, without any conscious effort, dispose of a large and full-flavoured draught of whisky-and-soda.

"I thank you, brother-in-law—a truly ample and generous portion: would that you were paying for it! And don't drown it, sink you!"



## *Book IV*

### THE BENT BANANA

#### I

**A**DRIAN glanced at the last sheet of the letter, and groaned.

"As I feared," he sighed sadly, hurriedly scanning the contents of the missive. "The blow has fallen. Disaster is upon us. The sinister omen of the Tunbridge Wells postmark did not escape my lean brown eye. Sheila, my cabbage, we are for it."

My sister buttered her last piece of toast and garnished it generously with marmalade.

"Aunt Kennethina?" she inquired flatly.

"Of course," returned my brother-in-law. "Reversing, as ever, that normal human instinct which prompts the right-minded rich to Go North in August, Aunt Kennethina has Come South. Quitting her native Yorkshire moors at the only season of the year when those desolate, wind-swept wastes become relatively habitable, she has descended, bag and baggage, on the unoffending Pantiles. O God! O Montreal!"

"Tough," I murmured sympathetically. "Tunbridge Wells is barely an hour's run from here, too."

## *Lean Brown Men*

"Is she coming over here?" asked Sheila with her mouth full.

Despite the heat of the morning Adrian shuddered slightly. "She doesn't say so, but she will indubitably subject us to a series of visitations when she has recovered somewhat from the fatigue of travel. At the moment, however, she contents herself with commanding our presence at afternoon tea. I trust, Marcus," he continued, addressing himself to me, "that your automobile is in full working order?"

"To-day?" moaned Sheila.

"As ever was," her husband confirmed grimly. "At four-thirty o'clock precisely, Aunt Kennethina will pour out the weak tea and unveil the seed cake. Remember, darling, to pack my tooth-pick in your handbag, will you?"

"All three of us?" my sister persisted.

Adrian pursed his lips.

"In point of fact she specifies only you and me," he replied, "but I have no doubt that the omission of Marcus simply implies that she is unaware of his presence here. I think I can take it upon myself to say that she will be delighted to see you, brother," he concluded with an affable grin in my direction.

"You overwhelm me, my dear fellow," I smiled, making a long arm for the sugar-basin. "I much regret, however, that your excellent aunt will have to forgo her delight. Be so good as to convey to her my compliments, my regards, and all other expressions of esteem, and say how

## *The Bent Banana*

deeply distressed I am that a prior engagement prevents me from taking my place at her festive board. You need not add, lest the disappointment prove too great for her, that by the time she is feeling well enough to come over here, pressing business will have compelled me to return to Town."

"Pig!" cried Sheila.

"Dog!" growled Adrian, reaching for *The Times*. "Come, come. I had thought better of you, Marcus."

"Rats!" I contributed firmly. "I'm sorry, Adrian; but the Kennethina woman is, after all, your aunt and not mine, and you will remember the dictum of the Apostle Paul appropriate to the situation. Willingly enough do I contribute my only sister as your coadjutrix and *compagnon de voyage*, but beyond that I must decline to have any part in your junketings—except," I added hastily, becoming aware of mutinous looks, "that I might also consider giving you the use of my car, provided that you buy your own petrol and return the vehicle to me in approximately its present condition."

My sister regarded me with some suspicion. "You know jolly well you haven't got a prior engagement, as you call it," she accused me.

"Pardon me, but I have," I protested politely.

"What is it, then?"

"Its nature is strictly confidential, my dear. As the wife of one soldier and the sister of another, you would not ask me to divulge state secrets?"



## *Lean Brown Men*

"But—how can you keep a date if you haven't got a car?" Sheila demanded shrewdly.

"Leave it to me, sweet one," I answered. "There are ways and means, let me assure you. You and Adrian just run away and enjoy yourselves, and don't trouble your pretty head about your poor old brother."

They both made faces at me, and for some moments a silence hung over the breakfast-table. I pretended to read my paper, but in reality I was secretly congratulating myself on the skill and ease with which I had manœuvred myself out of that tea-party. Only once had I encountered Adrian's aunt, and the meeting had not been altogether an unqualified success. Aunt Kennethina—(where *had* she acquired that monstrous name?)—had, so far as I could discern, only one attribute to commend her: namely, a small but utterly gilt-edged income of three or four hundred a year. It was not exactly a fortune, but it would make a very acceptable addition to the pay or pension of an otherwise impecunious Indian Army officer. Moreover, Adrian was her nearest relative and heir-presumptive, so it obviously behoved him to keep on the right side of her. This consideration applied with equal force to my sister Sheila, now Adrian's wife, but so far as I could see there was no reason whatever why I myself should trespass on her hospitality. Indeed, I persuaded myself that I was really doing my brother-in-law a service by staying away, for Aunt Kennethina

## *The Bent Banana*

patently disapproved of me and there was no sense in reminding her that her nephew had married my sister.

"We'd better leave here about two," said Sheila presently, "and then we can stop in Stillbrook and change some library books. What will you do about your tea, Marcus?"

"Oh, I'm sufficiently domesticated to get it myself," I answered airily and unthinkingly. "That's quite easy, my dear."

"But I thought you'd be out, keeping your appointment, in which case you won't want any," was the honeyed comment. "Will you or won't you?"

"I—er—may or may not," I said ambiguously. "It all depends on—er—on circumstances, so to speak——"

At this point, mercifully, Adrian looked up from *The Times*. "Did you ever know a bird named Tancred in your Regiment, Marcus?"

I sat up and took notice.

"Tancred? Old man Tancred? Good Lord, yes. Why?"

"Lieutenant-Colonel Alfred Edward Tancred, C.M.G.?"

"That's the chap. What about him?"

"Dead," said Adrian. "Heart failure, at Malvern. There's the regulation six-line obituary here, conveying absolutely damn-all. He was born, he went to school, he served, and he has died, without seeming to have distinguished himself in any way. You knew him, did

## *Lean Brown Men*

you, Marcus? I've never heard you mention him."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"No particular reason to," I said, scanning the barren lines. "He wasn't a bad old stick in his way, but he was the sort of man whose existence you forget the moment he's out of sight. Poor old Tancred. Yes—he went through the motions of commanding us some years ago, during the latter part of my adjutancy, to be precise. Before your time, of course, Adrian. He's been retired a long time now."

"Hadn't he a wife?" Sheila put in, wrinkling her forehead. "I'm almost sure I've heard you speak of a Mrs. Tancred, Marcus."

I laughed shortly. "Possibly," I agreed, sophistically concealing my true emotions. "She was a very remarkable woman."

"That'll do," my brother-in-law interposed with mock severity. "Not before my delicate-minded wife. . . ."

That made me chuckle aloud. "My dear fellow, if you'd ever seen the lady——"

"Enough!" cried Adrian, pushing back his chair and rising. "These sordid Anglo-Indian romances shall have no place at my breakfast-table. No sultry, spice-laden punkah-blast from the sinful, scented East shall, with my assent, sully or smirch the wholesome pudicity of this Sussex air. I am ashamed of you, brother. Moreover, I reject your excuses with contumely. No matter if the lady were as beautiful as Cleo-

## *The Bent Banana*

patra, and yourself as lean, brown and hawk-eyed as Desmond, V.C., himself, you should still have remembered the Honour of the Regiment, the White Man's Burden, the Still Small Voice, and the Obligations of the Pukka Sahib. What is more——”

“You've dribbled all down your tie, you disgusting creature,” his wife broke in unkindly. “Go and change it at once. In any case,” she went on, stabbing the newspaper with a fingernail, “it says here that Colonel Tancred's wife ‘predeceased’ him by nearly a dozen years, so she can't have been particularly young——”

“Predeceased him, did she?” Adrian interrupted suspiciously from the door. “I might have guessed as much.” He paused and fixed me with a ludicrously prim and accusing eye. “We will not sully our minds by determining,” he went on, “whether she fell a victim to her own remorse or to the just fury of her cuckold spouse, but I would wager, were I a betting man, that she did not die a natural death.”

I lit a cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke.

“You'd win your bet,” I conceded gravely as I folded my napkin, “though I need hardly say that your speculations as to the circumstances are as wildly wide of the mark as they can possibly be. Mrs. Tancred certainly did die an unnatural death—one might even say a melodramatic death—but——”

“I knew it! And you needn't perjure your-

## *Lean Brown Men*

self by pretending that you had no connection with it."

"On the contrary," I said, "I was quite closely connected with it. In fact, there's only one person in the world who knows more about it than I do, and one other who knows as much. Now that old Tancred's dead I suppose there's rather less reason to keep mum about what happened."

Adrian looked alarmed, and Sheila hastily rose from the table.

"Unfortunately," said my brother-in-law, "an urgent engagement with my tobacconist makes it impossible for me to hear your confession just now. Don't forget to get your car nicely tuned up for us, will you? You have the whole morning before you, so there's no need to scamp your work." And with that he slid out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Sheila, a pile of plates and coffee-cups balanced precariously in each hand, kissed me lightly on the tip of my nose and prepared to follow him.

"I'm sure it's a fearfully exciting story, darling," she murmured placatingly. "We'd have been thrilled to hear it if we hadn't such a busy day in front of us. Some other time, perhaps—or why don't you write it down, so that we could read it at our leisure? Be a lamb and open the door for me, Marcus: and if you're coming towards the kitchen you might bring the milk-jug and marmalade. . . ."

## *The Bent Banana*

### II

Shortly after luncheon Sheila and Adrian drove off towards the Kentish border in my trusty car and a state of nepotic resignation. Having weakly allowed myself to be cajoled into undertaking the dire task of washing up I dutifully bespattered the scullery with soapsuds and broken glass, and then, after changing into the coolest clothes I could find, I set out to keep that prior engagement which had so unfortunately prevented me from taking tea in Tunbridge Wells.

I had not far to go, for my appointment was simply with a comfortable deck-chair in the orchard. Thither I adjourned with sun-glasses, fly-whisk and newspapers, and prepared to spend a blissful afternoon in my own pleasant company. I am not, I hope, an unsociable man, but long years in India have taught me the eternal verity that, no matter how one may occupy the rest of the day, the hours between luncheon and tea are designed by nature for indulgence in the virtue of solitary sloth. In the East, and in the more Christian countries of Europe, this truth is recognized and hallowed by the institution of the siesta. Only in the pagan North, where men have ceased to worship every god but the Golden Calf, is one expected to remain in a state of full consciousness throughout the afternoon.

Yet this afternoon I did not sleep, though I

## *Lean Brown Men*

closed my eyes and prepared to abandon my senses to Morpheus. Indeed, I might have succumbed but for the accident that, opening one eye to mark the manœuvres of a restless wasp, I chanced to catch sight again of that page of *The Times* carrying the six-line obituary of poor old Tancred, and from that moment onwards my brain would not relax. It was not that the death of my one-time colonel induced in me any great sense of personal loss, though I reminded myself that he had been a decent old chap, and, in any case, it is always a solemn matter to realize that a man one has known has left this world for good. Still, I argued, Tancred had been an old man, and death is the common lot of all humanity, so I commended his soul to God and shed no needless tears for him. Characteristically, this voice from the past caused the great bulk of my memories to centre, not upon Colonel Tancred himself, but upon that strange, egregious creature who had been his wife. And from Mrs. Tancred my thoughts strayed, by an inevitable process of mental association, to Mary Ballard, whom Mrs. Tancred had nicknamed the Bent Banana.

The Bent Banana. . . .

Was it, in fact, Mrs. Tancred who had first contrived that name for Mary Ballard? After this lapse of years it is impossible to say for certain, but I think there can be little doubt of it. It is not the kind of nickname that would occur to a man; and it suggests, to my mind, exactly

## *The Bent Banana*

the catty, contemptuous type of cleverness that was so typical of Colonel Tancred's wife.

A most unpleasant woman was Mrs. Tancred—just about as far removed from Adrian's jestingly glamorous conception as it would be possible to imagine. The mere fact that she henpecked her husband was of little interest to anyone but that unfortunate officer himself. He was a charming, courteous old gentleman, who would have had very little to say for himself even if he had been allowed to say it—which he wasn't. While still a junior captain he had left the Regiment to officiate in some unimportant Staff job at Simla ; and there he had married, to the undying indignation of his seniors, for, in those days, when the Frontier Force rarely left the border, we had a strong tradition of celibacy, which it was definitely rash to flout. But Mrs. Tancred was no ordinary woman, and by dint of a wire-pulling campaign which would have roused the envy of Mrs. Hauksbee herself, she had contrived to keep her husband away from the Regiment in a succession of lucrative posts in the Hills. Only when the passage of time and the wastage of war had brought him to the top of the regimental roll did she allow him to discard the grey-blue brassard of Army Headquarters and return to the fold as Commandant.

As a figurehead, Colonel Tancred was passably ornamental, but it was Mrs. Tancred who commanded us ; and, absurd though it may seem, it is only fair to admit that she did it rather well.



## *Lean Brown Men*

She was a large yellow woman, not unlike a haddock, but heavily bearded and copiously warted. Her voice was gruff and profound, and I have little doubt that she would have drilled the Regiment far more impressively than her husband ever did. She was a magnificent horse-woman, and it was her boast that there was not a man-eater in our horse-lines that she had not ridden and conquered. She knew every animal by sight and repute, and she was the terror of every Vet. or Remount Officer who dared show his nose in the neighbourhood.

Similarly, although she never came near the office or the men's quarters, in some uncanny way she knew every sowar and Indian Officer by name and record within a few weeks of her arrival. I can vouch for this, for I was Adjutant at the time and had many a brush with her regarding promotions and appointments ; and it soon became clear to me that she knew all the contents of my confidential files as well. There was nothing particularly mysterious about this, for the Colonel used to take home two or three every day, ostensibly to bring his knowledge of regimental affairs up to date after his long absence. Possibly he skimmed through them, but his wife certainly digested them. One could never get an immediate decision on a knotty point from old man Tancred. He would invariably promise to "think it over"—and the next day, having put the problem to his wife, he would pronounce his decree. And it was always the right one !

## *The Bent Banana*

India teems with objectionable women, but Mrs. Tancred was in a class by herself. Her administration of the Regiment at large was at least done tactfully, from behind the scenes, but with us British Officers she came right into the open and bullied us unmercifully. From a social point of view she ordered our lives in detail, and we were so taken aback that we could put up no effective resistance.

Our custom of celibacy, though no longer rigidly enforced, still held good in practice, and for some months after his arrival the Colonel was our only married officer present in Khanzai, the unpleasant little frontier cantonment where we were stationed. True, one of our number, Toby Ballard, had cabled out from England to say he was bringing a wife back with him, but we none of us knew the girl, and, as a matter of fact, everyone felt rather uncomfortable about Toby's lapse into matrimony.

We all loved Toby—the best of good fellows—but the truth was that at that time Khanzai was no place for women, unless they were Amazons of Mrs. Tancred's type. Nominally, indeed, we were at peace with the local tribes, but anyone with a few years' frontier experience could see that a first-class row was brewing. Some months previously the Raghza Khel, a notoriously mischievous tribe just over the border, had revived their ancient and traditional sport of raiding villages in British territory. Unfortunately, the local Political Agent had handled the

## *Lean Brown Men*

situation with deplorable weakness, and no effective retaliation had been made. As a consequence, the Raghza Khel had become more and more daring in their depredations, until at length they had begun to raid Khanzai itself—first the native city and later the cantonment. With the connivance of the inhabitants of near-by villages, a small band of picked warriors would descend suddenly upon us in the dark hours of the morning, loot a bungalow or two, start a couple of fires, and make good their escape before we were able to engage or interrupt them.

Guards and sentries were doubled, trebled, and quadrupled in not very successful endeavours to check these incursions. Small mobile detachments stood by, night after night, in readiness to frustrate the raiders, and the percentage of "nights in bed" rapidly fell to the limit of endurance. Khanzai had only a small garrison, and it was impossible to mount a guard on each individual bungalow, so in some ways going to bed was a more perilous adventure than remaining on duty. Yet the Government still seemed unwilling to take a strong line with our tormentors, and life became more burdensome and exasperating every day.

Everyone thought the climax had been reached when a gang of ruffians burst one night into the small bungalow occupied by old Nethersole, the chaplain, and his family. Man and wife were stabbed to death as they slept, while, in an adjoining room, their daughter Veronica met with an

## *The Bent Banana*

unspeakable end. One would have imagined that this outrage would have roused the Empire ; but, as luck would have it, its date coincided with that of a startling political assassination in Europe, which claimed the monopoly of the news-columns. Once again the Government of India, ungoaded by the sharp spur of public opinion, did little more than wag its finger at the Raghza Khel and tell them they really mustn't.

Under the stress of these happenings I think we had all forgotten about Toby Ballard and his bride, and it was with something of a shock that I read his telegram from Bombay. Life had been so feverish of late that I had even forgotten to arrange for their accommodation.

This presented rather a ticklish problem, for there had never been too many bungalows in Khanzai, and the number available had been seriously curtailed by the recent raids. Besides, it would be out of the question to isolate the Ballards in a bungalow by themselves, for Toby would be lucky if he slept in his bed three nights a week, and it would be madness to leave any woman alone and unguarded to face those perilous hours of darkness. Having rapidly considered the matter from every angle, I came to the conclusion that, since time pressed, I had better omit the formality of consulting the Colonel (who would, as usual, simply have promised to "think it over") and take counsel with Mrs. Tancred direct. She and her husband occupied

## *Lean Brown Men*

a large bungalow not far from the Club, and with them lived our second-in-command—the idea being, of course, that he and the Colonel should take alternate nights on duty so that Mrs. Tancred should never be left unprotected. It occurred to me, however, that if the Major could be persuaded to surrender his quarters to the Ballards we could easily make room for him in one of our bachelor bungalows, and this would allow Mrs. Ballard to enjoy the company—if one may grossly misuse the expression—of the only other woman in the Regiment.

But Mrs. Tancred had other views : she always had.

I found her at sunset drinking a long whisky-and-soda on her veranda. She grunted menacingly at me, and without enthusiasm poured me a peg in a smeary tumbler. The bottle of mineral water which she added to it turned out to be lemonade, but I lacked the nerve to complain.

“The Ballards? Good Lord, d’you mean to say you’ve only just thought of ’em?” she growled, when I had broached the subject. “My good fool, I’ve had it all fixed up for a fortnight or more. Snapped up the Nethersoles’ bungalow the moment it came vacant.” And she lit a cigarette and glared at me.

“*The Nethersoles’*?” I echoed in amazement.

“Well?”

“Well, I mean to say, it’s barely habitable, is it?” I demurred. “And, in any case, it seems

## *The Bent Banana*

hardly the place for a bride just out from Home, Mrs. Tancred."

"Tshut! What nonsense you men talk! The woman can think herself lucky to get a roof over her head at all, butting in like this at five minutes' notice. Personally, I think it's most providential that this bungalow came vacant when it did."

"But——"

"It's a bit scorched in parts, where those idiotic Raghza Khel tried to burn it," Mrs. Tancred resumed, cutting me short, "but you can't expect Golders Green in Khanzai. And one or two of the walls were bloody, but I've told the landlord to distemper them dark red, and the furniture-man is touching up his rubbish as well. He's going to change that mirror that got smashed."

"Oh. But look here, Mrs. Tancred——"

"Well?"

"Well, dash it, we can't maroon Toby and his wife there by themselves. It isn't safe——"

"Tshut! I wasn't suggesting anything of the kind. I want you to move over there too, to keep this woman company when her husband is on duty."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. You can't expect the Major to move, and with Captain Herbert in hospital you're the only captain here till Roscoe gets back."

"But there's Armitage, or Smythe, or——"

"Tshut! You know perfectly well that every

## Lean Brown Men

subaltern is a potential lecher, and I'll have no scandals in the Regiment while I'm—while my husband is commanding."

"But——"

"I've even arranged servants for them," Mrs. Tancred went on ruthlessly. "I'm letting them have my own cook. I was going to sack him, anyway, so it's quite providential."

I swallowed, but could not speak.

"You'd better go to the station and meet them when they arrive," were my next orders. "Day after to-morrow, isn't it? Bombay Mail, I suppose. Well, you can't be on early parade if you do that, so you'd better tell Smythe to post your markers and generally play at adjutant for you."

"Yes, but——"

"Tshut!" snapped Mrs. Tancred decisively; and she got up from her chair and went indoors without another word.

## III

In those days I wasn't much of a ladies' man, but I suppose I had been subconsciously hoping that Mrs. Ballard would at least be pleasant to look upon. Toby himself was a huge, brawny mountain of a man, and in my mind's eye I had decided that his wife would be his exact anti-thesis: pretty, dainty, *petite*.

But Mary Ballard proved to be none of these things. She was very tall and very thin (I

## *The Bent Banana*

should dearly love to substitute the euphemisms "slim and graceful" here, but that would be overstepping all the bounds), and she stooped, so that her whole body was bent like a crescent moon, or a long-bow at tension, or—yes, a bent banana. I learned later that it was spinal trouble; that she had spent ten years of her life in bed; and that it was something of a miracle that she could even walk. Her hair was dark and straight, her pale face long and pointed. Yet she had lovely eyes, and when she smiled you caught a glimpse of the inner woman. I took to her instinctively, and I think she liked me too.

I managed to get a few private words with Toby while we were seeing about the baggage in the guard's van, and I broke it to him about the bungalow. His face clouded a little as he listened, but in the end he shrugged his shoulders and gave a little laugh.

"Well, it can't be helped, Marcus," he said cheerfully, "and I must say it's damn good of you to have put yourself out like this. Mary'll be glad of you when I'm not there, and I shall know she's in safe hands. But, look here, we simply mustn't let her know about this Nethersole business. She—she isn't very strong, you know, and—well, she's a bit highly-strung, if you know what I mean. I was in two minds about bringing her out with me, but she begged so hard, and it seemed pretty tough to separate when we were only just spliced. So for the love of Mike keep this bungalow affair dark, won't you?"



## *Lean Brown Men*

"I'll try," I promised, not too hopefully. "Needless to say, everyone here knows about it, and you know what idiots some people can be. One thing—it isn't a bad bungalow as they go, and it's been done up after a fashion."

"Good," rejoined Toby. "We must just hope for the best, that's all."

I suppose one's first Indian cantonment—even a hole like Khanzai—can hardly fail to induce something of a thrill, and Mary seemed quite excited as we drove through the dusty, fly-infested streets in the mess tonga. She sat in front next to me, and the more she talked the more I liked her. She was definitely but unobtrusively well-read and intelligent, and, above all, natural. In a beauty-competition she would not have carried off even the smallest consolation prize, but she had undoubted charm and intellect. Naturally enough, she was burning with curiosity about her new home, and she plied me with questions concerning the bungalow. I am still rather proud of my tactfully evasive replies.

Tastes differ, and the spice of novelty is a wonderful condiment. To my jaundiced eye the bungalow was simply a bungalow, neither much better nor much worse than a hundred others, but to Mary Ballard it was nothing short of marvellous. Only the parched, barren garden shocked her, with its sickly yellow cacti and greyish shrubs wilting pitifully above the caked soil. But even as the tonga ploughed up the

## *The Bent Banana*

dusty drive her poet's eye was planning its redemption, and by the time we had reached the bungalow she had already sited in her mind's eye the rose-beds, the herbaceous borders, and the sweet-pea plantations.

All women do that with their first Indian garden—but only with the first.

Toby and I exchanged glances of amused relief as that wretched bungalow emerged triumphant from her swift inspection. Lying splendidly, I explained away the smoke-stains on the veranda and the blistered lintel of a door, and later, inspired I know not whence, I expounded a most convincing theory relating to the cooling and sun-defying effect of dark red distemper. Toby watched me gratefully, and by the time I had breakfasted with them and departed for my office I felt able to congratulate myself that the first crisis had been safely surmounted.

"It's just lovely to feel we've arrived and can settle down peacefully," Mary called after me, as I set out.

I laughed and waved my hand, but this time I avoided Toby's eye. I did not exactly envy him the job of giving her the hang of things.

## IV

I was on duty that night, so I went to bed after lunch and slept till nearly dinner-time. Consequently I missed the first meeting of Mary

## *Lean Brown Men*

Ballard and Mrs. Tancred. This took place at the Club at dusk, and from what I heard about it afterwards I was glad I had not been there. The Ballards got back to the bungalow shortly before I left for mess, and Toby dropped in to see me when I was at the tie-tying stage.

"Seen Mrs. Tancred?" I inquired casually, as he helped himself to a cigarette.

"We have," was the short reply. "Laddie, that woman's a bitch, or I'm a Dutchman."

I laughed. "I thought she'd shake you, Toby. The rest of us have had five long months of her already, so we're getting hardened, but she grates a bit at first, doesn't she?"

"Grates? She's an arch-sow—and that's an insult to a well-meaning animal. Gosh, I nearly pushed her ugly face in!"

I brushed my hair in tactful silence, watching Toby's reflection in the mirror. He looked positively mutinous.

"I don't care a damn for myself," he went on presently, "but she was absolutely foul to Mary, and that hurts. Why are some women such beasts to others of their sex? You'd have thought that in a place like this they'd be glad to hang together, wouldn't you?"

I slipped on my mess-jacket, and poured out a couple of sherries.

"There are two ways of looking at everything, Toby," I said, "and in this particular case I can only say that if your lady wife had hit it off with the Tancred, I for one should have been bitterly

## *The Bent Banana*

disappointed in her. The very fact that they don't get on speaks volumes for Mrs. Ballard, and shows she's the right sort. Well, I must be off. Good night, and pleasant dreams to you both ! ”

“ Perhaps you're right,” Toby admitted, setting down his empty glass and preparing to depart. “ It's an idea, anyhow. Well, chin-chin, brave soldier boy, and good huntin' ! ”

His wish came true, as a matter of fact, for in the early hours of the next morning my patrol surprised a gang of raiders sneaking towards the military hospital. Although they, fortunately, did not know it, they outnumbered us by three to one, but we succeeded in potting three or four of them and taking a brace of prisoners. Rather a good show, with less than a dozen shots fired, and I found myself almost a hero at breakfast in mess, for the Raghza Khel had been having things all their own way of late, and it was high time that we won a round.

What with having to tell the story a dozen or so times, both officially and unofficially, and attending to the most urgent of my office work, I did not get back to the bungalow till after midday. Toby was wrestling with a packing-case on the long veranda, which ran the full length of the bungalow, and he was surrounded by shavings and tissue paper. He had seen the Colonel earlier that morning, and had got the day off to settle in.

## *Lean Brown Men*

"See the conquering hero comes!" he chanted, as I came up. "Do you get a D.S.O., or merely an unpaid brevet?"

"More likely a raspberry for having bumped off some of the Political Agent's alleged 'friendlies,'" I replied. "More to the point, how did you get on? Clement night, and so forth?"

"Not so clement. No sleep after two-thirty a.m., when your little battle woke us. I call it none too civil of you to swashbuckle so 'earty in the night watches, old son."

"We only fired ten rounds," I protested, "and the Raghza Khel didn't get off any at all. A pretty peaceful battle, all things considered, but naturally you're rather out of practice and it's all new to Mrs. Ballard. How is she, by the way?"

"Not too chirpy, to be candid. I've made her stay in bed this morning."

"Sorry to hear that. Look here, Toby, I'm unclean and itching for a bath. Come and help, and then we can discuss affairs of state. I suppose the Colonel told you you're on duty to-night?"

"Yes—inlying piquet." Toby brushed the sawdust from his clothes and followed me indoors.

It was while I was having a badly-needed shave that he opened fire.

"You're sleeping here to-night, of course?" he began, a trifle nervously, I thought.

I nodded. "Always provided that your inlying piquet doesn't make sleep impossible," I

## *The Bent Banana*

assured him. "Let's hope it won't, for I reckon the Raghza Khel had a dose last night that'll keep 'em quiet for a week or so. Still, one can never tell with those parishioners."

"One cannot—unless they've reformed in my absence," Toby agreed. "They're just as likely to beat us up good and proper to-night, by way of returning last night's doubtful compliment. Look here, Marcus, I want to say something—about Mary. I hate having to say it, but it's only fair that I should. Last night was a bit of an eye-opener to me, frankly. As you say, it was really an unusually quiet war, but it shook her up badly, poor kid."

I was shaving my lower lip, which provided an excellent excuse for confining my reply to a non-committal grunt.

"Of course, these cheery little midnight skirmishes *are* all new to her," he resumed, fiddling with a shoe-lace, "and she was pretty tired after all our travels. Still, even making due allowance for that, I'm afraid she's—well, nervy, to say the least. Vivid imagination, you know."

I grunted again without looking at him. It was rather difficult to find anything to say.

"She may get used to it," he went on a moment later, "but I thought I'd better tip you the wink in case anything happens to-night. Let's hope nothing will, but you'll be a good soul and look her up if you hear any firing, won't you?"

"But certainly," I answered. "That's what

## *Lean Brown Men*

I'm here for, though I haven't had much experience in comforting damsels in distress. Leave her to me, Toby, and don't worry!"

"Good man! I'm dashed sorry to let you in for this, honestly. I suppose I ought not to have brought her——"

"Oh, rot! It's nothing to be sorry or ashamed about, after all. Don't *you* ever get the wind up when there's a scrap on? I don't mind telling you I do."

"I? Great Gosh, my heart leaps up and flaps against my tonsils every time I hear a shot fired," laughed Captain T. O. Ballard, M.C., moving towards the door; "but somehow it seems different for Mary, if you see what I mean. Anyhow, let's hope for the best."

And he left me, to resume his unpacking.

## V

Never shall I forget my first night as Mary Ballard's bodyguard.

At the Club that evening there was considerable speculation, and even betting, as to what would be the reaction of the Raghza Khel to the events of the previous night, and although there was much division of opinion it was nevertheless universally agreed that they would either leave us alone altogether, or else treat us to something really special in the way of raids.

As it turned out, the Raghza Khel selected

## *The Bent Banana*

the latter alternative, but, with that genius for double-crossing which makes those very bad men almost lovable, they succeeded in misleading us into believing that they had chosen the former. The time-honoured hour for their raids was 2 a.m.—or at any rate between 1 and 3—and when, on this occasion, 3.30 chimed peacefully on the quarter-guard gongs, one could almost hear the sighs of relief rising through the still night air. At 4 a.m. all but one or two of the patrols were withdrawn, and the piquets, except for their double sentries, were allowed to lie down and sleep.

Less than an hour of darkness remained, and a deep calm brooded over Khanzai. And then, at 4.15 precisely, the Raghza Khel chuckled into their wicked beards and set light to the Brigadier's bungalow, the Piffer Mess, three haystacks at the Grass Farm, and (a real master-stroke this) the headquarters of Mr. Gandhi's local sedition bureau. It was a beautiful raid, charmingly conceived and exquisitely executed. No lives were lost on either side, but there could be no doubt as to where the moral victory lay.

So much for what happened out of doors. I heard all about it later on, but at the time I was far too concerned with other matters to worry about anything beyond the walls of our bungalow. I think I can claim to have passed a busier night than most people.

I had hurried back from mess as early as I



## *Lean Brown Men*

could, so as to "take over" Mary from her husband before he went on duty. She was looking worried and pale, I thought, but she kissed him good-night bravely enough, and chatted cheerfully with me for the best part of an hour after he had gone. We kept away from warlike topics until just before I left her, and it was only when I told her to bang on the wall or shout for me if she wanted anything that she broached the subject which had, I knew, been uppermost in her mind all the time.

"Will there be another raid to-night?" she asked, as I stood up to depart.

"Most unlikely," I assured her bluffly.

"I'm afraid I'm a terrible funk," she said, with a nervous little laugh. "Did Toby tell you?"

"Most certainly he didn't, Mrs. Ballard. He told me you'd been a bit nervous last night, to which I replied—quite truthfully—that you'd have been a queer sort of girl if you hadn't. The night-life of Khanzai takes a bit of getting used to, you know."

She sighed, and looked past me with large, wistful eyes. "They say you can get used to anything in time, don't they, Captain Darell? Well, it won't be for want of trying if I don't. But I'm afraid I *am* a funk, all the same. I was petrified last night, and I know I'll make a fool of myself the next time it happens."

"Well, don't worry about it," I laughed. "Give me a shout if you start feeling het-up,

## *The Bent Banana*

and we'll have a cup of tea and a game of Snap, or something. After all, we can't all be Mrs. Tancreds, thank goodness!"

"Ah, Mrs. Tancred! I suppose she sleeps soundly through everything?"

"Either that, or else she gets up and wanders round the cantonment with a six-shooter, looking for Raghza Khel."

"No! Does she really? How marvellous!"

"H'm. Personally, I should call it absolutely unnatural," I demurred. "However, Heaven forbid that she should be discouraged, for with any luck she'll come to a sticky end that way, one of these nights."

"You sound as if you dislike her."

"Candidly, I do. Ineffably. Don't you?"

"I think she's horrid," Mary Ballard replied quietly; "but it takes all sorts to make a world, and I suppose she's one of God's creatures, like the rest of us."

"My hat, that's a sensational theory!" The idea quite shook me. "Still, there may be something in it. Well, good night, Mrs. Ballard. Sleep well, and don't forget there's only a thin wall between your bed and mine, if you want me."

"I certainly won't. Good night!"

I was glad to turn in, for I was sick for sleep. It was nearly a week since I had had a good night's rest, and as I undressed I prayed hard that the Raghza Khel would stay at home for once. And then, having placed an unloaded

## *Lean Brown Men*

revolver under my pillow (by way of decoy), and a loaded one under the bed-clothes near my right thigh, I switched off the lamp and went to sleep.

Twenty minutes later I was awake again.

I am always a light sleeper, and Khanzai sharpens one's subconscious wits. I knew that some slight noise had disturbed me, and I strained my ears to catch it again, should it be repeated. A moment's silence, and then it came—a muffled, choking kind of moan from the next room.

Seizing my revolver, I threw back the bed-clothes and slid lightly out of bed. The communicating door had, by arrangement, been left unlocked, and I was just about to rush in when I heard the sound again. But it was no longer that dreadful moan. It was the sound of a woman weeping and trying to restrain herself.

Relieved, though uncertain what to do, I tiptoed to the window and glanced out into the compound. It was a moonless night, but the blue-black sky was brilliant with stars. At the corner of the veranda I descried the dark figure of the chowkidar (night watchman) squatting peaceably over the glowing bowl of his hubble-bubble, awake but motionless. Silence reigned everywhere, save in the next room where poor Mary was wrestling with her sobs.

What should I do : barge in and try to cheer her up, or pretend not to hear? Delicacy and common sense dictated the latter course, so I

## *The Bent Banana*

went back to bed, but not immediately to sleep. I felt worried about that girl, yet what could I do? She must be a bundle of nerves, I told myself drowsily, and yet I could not quite agree with her self-denunciation as a "funk," for she was doing her best to be brave. . . . Poor kid. . . . Tough on Toby, too. . . . All wrong to bring her to such a place, of course, yet dashed understandable. . . .

And again I slept.

It was almost on the stroke of midnight when I heard her scream. No moaning or suppressed sobbing now, but a shriek of real terror. This time I did not hesitate. Torch in one hand and revolver in the other, I flung open the door and rushed into her room.

But no scene of dreadful slaughter met my eyes; only Mary Ballard cowering beneath the bedding in the dark and empty room.

"What's wrong?" I demanded sharply, switching on the electric light and applying the safety-catch to my pistol.

"Oh, it's you!" she breathed, a world of relief in her voice. She sat up in bed, and the pallor of her long, unlovely face quite shocked me. "I—I'm most dreadfully sorry to have disturbed you," she stammered uncertainly. "I was a fool to scream, I know, but I was so horribly frightened."

"But why?" I asked, more gently. "What scared you? You didn't hear anything, did you?"

## *Lean Brown Men*

She hesitated. "No, not really."

"But how do you mean, 'not really'?" I pressed her. "Were you dreaming, do you think?"

She did not reply at once. I helped myself to a cigarette from Toby's box, and lit it before it occurred to me to offer her one. She accepted it gratefully.

"Perhaps I was dreaming," she surmised, a moment later, "and yet I could have sworn I wasn't actually asleep. It was more like—oh, I can't describe it. . . . Captain Darell, has anything terrible ever happened in this bungalow?"

"My dear Mrs. Ballard——"

"Oh, you'll think me absurd, but please don't laugh at me. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I'm rather sensitive about houses, and just now it seemed as if . . ." Her voice trailed away.

My mind had been working rapidly, and I think I produced quite a convincing laugh.

"Look here, Mrs. Ballard, you're a bit overwrought, if you don't mind my saying so," I prevaricated. "Khanzai has had a pretty hectic history, you know, and this is one of the oldest bungalows in the place, so there's no telling whether your idea is sense or nonsense. But life's too short to worry about such things, and this is hardly the time to start delving into the past."

"No, of course it isn't," she agreed, with a rather forced smile, "and I simply mustn't keep

## *The Bent Banana*

you from your bed any longer. I'm an awful idiot, but I'm better now, thanks to you."

"What about a drink," I suggested, "or a biscuit to munch? Draws the blood from the brain to the tummy, you know."

"No, thanks awfully. I'm sure I'll be all right now, and I believe I'll get to sleep."

I suppose she did, for I myself enjoyed nearly four hours of the best.

When, not long before dawn, the Raghza Khel started their little bonfire-party, it was the chowkidar who stealthily roused me.

For a minute or two there was no firing, as most of our patrols, as I have explained, were resting, and the raiders had carefully chosen for their burnt-offerings widely separated places well away from the piquet positions. The nearest conflagration to our bungalow was the Piffer Mess, and I packed off the chowkidar to give the alarm. Just as he was scaling the fence into the next compound there was a scurry of dark figures down the road, and with a thumping heart I realized that they were Raghza Khel.

Keeping well hidden behind a pillar of the veranda I watched them scuttle past, for single-handed I could do nothing to stop them and it would have been sheer suicide to invite their attention. To escape from cantonments they must pass close to the Supply Depot, where there was a small guard, and I dashed indoors to the telephone. But the exchange operator

## *Lean Brown Men*

already had his hands full, and by the time he could attend to me a sharp exchange of shots told me that the guard had been alert. The firing persisted, and I knew that the raiders had been held up. And then the clang of ammunition-boots reached me from the road outside, as a patrol doubled past. . . .

It was only at this point that I remembered Mary Ballard's existence, and my first reaction was one of surprise that she had apparently slept through the disturbance. There was still a deafening fusillade in progress not a couple of hundred yards away—why on earth wasn't she screaming the place down?

I tentatively tapped on her door. No reply. Queer. After a moment's hesitation I turned the handle and went in, switching on the light.

No sign of Mary!

My heart stood still, and my hair bristled as I gazed at her empty bed. What the devil could have happened? Surely—— And then the sound of a stifled sob drew my attention to the floor.

Yes—Mary Ballard was under her bed!

Nothing could induce me to write in detail the events of the next half-hour. It was the first time in my life that I had had to deal with a hysterical woman, and I had not the remotest idea how to set about it. It was fully five minutes before I could even get her out into the open, and then I only succeeded by getting down on to the floor and hauling her out by

## *The Bent Banana*

physical force. Then followed a period of wild, uncontrollable screaming, alternating with maniacal laughter which was even more horrible. Nothing I could do or say seemed to have the slightest effect on her, and to make matters worse the servants came running from their quarters in the compound to see what was amiss. I got rid of them somehow, though God alone knows what they thought!

At last her madness passed and she lay panting on the bed, faint but sane. She appeared to be dozing while I brewed some tea on my spirit-stove, but by the time it was ready she was fast asleep.

So I drank it myself, laced with a stiff peg of whisky. And in due course, as they say at Hollywood, Came the Dawn.

## VI

We held a kind of inquest later in the day—convened, let me say at once, by Mary herself. It says a good deal for her character that from the very first neither Toby nor I felt anything like so embarrassed as might have been expected.

We arrived at a verdict equivalent to “temporary insanity,” and left it at that. Actually, Toby had canvassed me beforehand to support a motion that his wife should be packed off to stay with friends at Peshawar for the present. Mary, however, herself scotched that notion



## *Lean Brown Men*

even before it was mooted. She made no attempt to minimize her failing, but she simply refused to admit defeat and I really believe that it was her dislike of Mrs. Tancred that stiffened her resolve to stick it out. If, she said, the Colonel's wife could go gunning for Raghza Khel single-handed, she, Mary Ballard, would at least train herself to lie quietly in bed while raids were in progress. It might take time, but she was determined to go through with it.

Altogether, she was the most puzzling mixture of courage and cowardice that I have ever met, and as I listened to her I could scarcely believe that this was the same mad, hysterical creature with whom I had wrestled in the small hours.

I went to the Club later on, and was immediately captured by Mrs. Tancred, who was sitting with her husband in a strategical corner of the main lounge. With surprising initiative the Colonel ordered me a drink, and then Mrs. Tancred attacked.

"Well, and how's the Bent Banana?" she demanded, fixing me with her cold haddock's eye.

It was the first time I had heard the nickname, but I tumbled to it immediately and am glad to say that I neither smiled nor gave her the satisfaction of explaining it to me.

"Mrs. Ballard is very well, thank you," I returned, offering my cigarette-case.

## *The Bent Banana*

"H'm. Feeling better, is she?"

"Better?" I repeated ingenuously. "Why, I wasn't aware——"

A snort of contempt interrupted me.

"Tshut! It's all over the place," declared Mrs. Tancred impatiently. "My bearer told me at breakfast, and you can bet your body-belt everyone else knows too."

"Oh, nonsense, my dear!" the Colonel broke in, with good-natured remonstrance. "Really, I see no reason——"

"Tshut!" snapped his wife, rounding on him. "What happened?" she continued, turning back to me.

"Nothing happened," I persisted, as politely as I could. "If you've been listening to servants' chatter about Mrs. Ballard I can only say you've got it all wrong. I admit the firing woke her up, and that, quite naturally, she—er—called out to me, to know what was going on. I also admit that the servants heard her—they *would*, though they're all stone-deaf when you really want them!—and came across to see if they could do anything. But that again was perfectly natural."

"Tchah!" remarked Mrs. Tancred, with a sniff.

"But as for any suggestion that she was hysterical, or any rot like that——"

"Aha! Now we're getting at it," cried the Tancred woman, triumphantly rubbing her knotty hands. "I didn't say a word about

## *Lean Brown Men*

hysteria, did I? You've let the cat out of the bag well and truly now, friend Darell!"

"Really, Mrs. Tancred——"

"Tshut! You know perfectly well that the Bent Banana was mad with fright, the stupid little idiot. All right, you needn't tell me any more. I'll come and see for myself one of these nights, when the Raghza Khel look us up again. I know how to deal with hysteria!"

I squirmed wretchedly, but my hackles rose high.

"Come and have a game of billiards," suggested Colonel Tancred, discreetly forestalling my outburst.

"Sit down!" commanded his wife.

"Now, really, my dear——"

"Very well, go and play billiards, then," was the menacing retort. "But don't be late for dinner, whatever you do. And you can tell your Bent Banana from me," she went on, addressing me again, "that if she can't pull herself together and behave in a manner befitting an officer's wife—well, she'd just better, that's all!"

I conjured up a grin of sorts, and gratefully followed the Colonel from the room. Fortune favoured us, for we managed to intercept the Ballards just as they reached the Club, and I had the pleasure of seeing Mary handed over to the safe custody of Mrs. McOstrich, the Civil Surgeon's wife, who was the only woman in Khanzai capable of holding her own against

## *The Bent Banana*

Mrs. Tancred. She had, in the dialect of her own land, "a tongue would clip a hedge," but she was nevertheless a good-hearted, kindly soul, and the sworn enemy of our Colonel's wife.

As it turned out, it was more than a week before the next act of the drama was staged. The powers at Simla, awake at last to the growing menace, authorized a small expedition over the border for the purpose of burning one or two of the Raghza Khel's villages; and this reprisal, which was many months overdue, kept our persecutors quiet for a few days.

Meanwhile, however, the "war" between Mrs. Tancred and the Bent Banana intensified. There was no open breach, and the two women met and talked on social occasions without apparent animosity. But Mrs. Tancred on one side and Mrs. McOstrich on the other waged an unending battle of tongues behind the lines, so to speak, and the ladies of Khanzai became divided, in the ratio of about one to ten, between the two factions. The men all sided with Mary Ballard.

The respite from raids, coupled with other encouraging factors, made life altogether more bearable. Two officers who had been temporarily absent rejoined us, and with their advent the burden of existence was considerably lightened. Piquets and patrols still had to be furnished as before, but one's tour of duty did

## *Lean Brown Men*

not come round with quite such sickening frequency, and a night or two of sound sleep worked wonders with us all.

Best of all, Mary Ballard seemed to have taken herself seriously in hand. At her request Toby had bought her an automatic pistol—a stupid little .22 affair, which appeared to me hardly better than a toy, but which seemed to give her confidence. Personally, I rather doubted the wisdom of entrusting so nervy a creature with a lethal weapon at all, but it was nothing to do with me. Every evening either Toby or I would take her down to the miniature range, and although at first it cost her something of an effort even to pull the trigger, she soon showed signs, surprisingly enough, of becoming quite a useful shot.

And then, at last, there was another raid.

## VII

Once again it so happened that Toby was on duty, while I stayed at home in charge of his wife.

The Raghza Khel reverted to their normal time-table, and it was shortly after two o'clock in the morning that the first volley awakened me. When I knocked at Mary's door I was answered by a faint but clear invitation to enter.

She was pale and nervous, but still in bed, and for a minute or two I was pleasantly sur-

## *The Bent Banana*

prised at the improvement in her behaviour. Still, I was none too happy, for the firing seemed to be coming closer, and soon I was troubled to see that hunted look creeping into her eyes again. I joked and talked nonsense in a desperate attempt to keep up her spirits, but the skirmish continued to approach nearer and nearer, until at last that wretched guard at the Supply Depot chipped in—and that was the last straw. Mary's head disappeared beneath the bed-clothes, and a second later she was once again in the throes of hysteria.

My first concern was to get possession of that dangerous little pistol, which I knew she had somewhere about her. After a struggle I managed to look under her pillow, but both Toby and I had warned her against keeping it in such an obvious place, and it was not there. Regardless of everything but her safety—and incidentally my own—I was about to embark of a search lower down the bed, when I heard the sound of the veranda door opening stealthily behind me. I spun round, gripping my own revolver, and prepared to be shot before I could use it.

But it was not the Raghza Khel—and for the moment I believe I was almost disappointed. For it was Mrs. Tancred.

As I have said already, she was never an attractive sight, but now she looked utterly grotesque. She was bareheaded, and her short yellow hair was all awry. She wore a man's

## *Lean Brown Men*

dark dressing-gown over striped, masculine-looking pyjamas, and her bare feet were thrust into *chaplis*—Pathan sandals of crudely tanned leather. Across her body, Wild West fashion, was slung a leather bandolier, the ends of which were attached to the holster of her revolver.

But it was the contemptuous, grimly satisfied smile on her face that repelled me most.

“H’m. I expected as much,” were her first words, mocking and malicious. “All right, Darell, you can leave her to me now. I know how to deal with the little milksop!”

Heaven knows I had been praying for help, but not from Mrs. Tancred. For a moment or two I continued to stand between her and her prey, uncertain what to do. Mary’s head was still under the bed-clothes, and she was not yet aware of her enemy’s presence. I felt bitterly disappointed that, after all her brave efforts, she should have been caught out like this, and I would have gone to almost any lengths to save her from the humiliation. But what could I do?

I could hardly order Mrs. Tancred from the room, for it was no more mine than hers; and besides, on the face of it, what could have been more natural than that she, the senior lady of the Regiment, should come to the aid of a sister in distress?

So eventually I shrugged my shoulders and stood aside.

“You’d better get out of here,” Mrs. Tancred

## *The Bent Banana*

ordered, taking off her bandolier and laying it on a table. "Go and keep watch on the veranda, if you must do something, and don't come back till I tell you. Understand?"

"What are you going to do?" I asked unhappily, still disinclined to surrender my ward to her mercies.

"Cure her, once and for all!" was the laconic response. "Now then, go to the devil—quick!"

So I got out, and passed through the door on to the veranda. In the stress of the last few minutes I had almost forgotten about the raid, and I was surprised to find that the firing had now ceased. From my knowledge of the place I deduced that the Raghza Khel, finding their way blocked by the Supply Depot guard, had probably cut across the polo-ground, thereby giving their pursuers the slip, and that they would try to sneak out of cantonments by the back-alleys of the Sadar Bazár.

It would be Toby's piquet that would be playing hide-and-seek with them now, and I wondered how he was faring. But most of all did I dread having to tell him of Mrs. Tancred's victory. It seemed to me that this was morally the end of that other fight, which the three of us had been waging for the past week or two. Mrs. Tancred had won, and she was not the person to be modest about it. She would reap to the full the fruits of triumph, and the story would be all over the station in a few hours' time. I feared that even the redoubtable Mrs.



## *Lean Brown Men*

McOstrich would not be able to counter this crushing blow.

No—we were defeated : annihilated, almost.

I still do not know what Mrs. Tancred did to Mary that night. Mary herself could never tell the whole story, for she was half-mad for the greater part of the time : with fear at first ; and later, when she had recognized Mrs. Tancred, with shame and despair. She had a vague recollection of being mercilessly drenched with cold water, and of being lifted up, shaken like a duster, and subjected to a withering fire of scorn and abuse. For my own part, all I know is that within a very short time her screams had lost the dreadful abandon of hysteria, and that they quickly subsided altogether. Out there on the veranda I felt rather like a man awaiting the result of an operation—all strung-up and apprehensive.

But at last I heard my name called—not from the door of Mary's room, but from mine, which was farther along. I turned, to find Mrs. Tancred standing there.

" Got any brandy ? " she demanded, as I went towards her.

" No ; only whisky," I replied.

" Better still. Give me some, will you ? "

I went indoors and fished out my bottle. I was pouring some into a medicine-glass when a snort interrupted me.

" Haven't you got a tumbler ? "

" A tumbler ? Yes, but I thought——"

## *The Bent Banana*

"Tshut ! It's for me, not her," she snapped. "I've given her a good stiff peg of sal-volatile, and that's all *she* gets !" She took the proffered tumbler and helped herself generously. "Soda !" was her next command.

I opened a bottle and filled up the glass. Mrs. Tancred took a gulp and then spluttered viciously. Even before she gave tongue I realized that I had given her lemonade. True and just is the Wheel !

I apologized gravely, and rectified the error. She drank in silence, and then gathered up her pistol and bandolier.

"Raid's over, apparently," she grunted, slinging the latter over her shoulder, "so I'll be getting along. The Bent Banana won't give you any more trouble to-night, you'll find."

"I suppose I ought to thank you," I said lamely.

"Tshut !" She moved towards the door.

"Look here—don't go for a minute," I put in.

She halted, and looked back over her shoulder. "Well ?"

"Don't make things too hard for Mrs. Ballard," I begged her, lowering my voice lest Mary should overhear, though the door between our rooms was closed. "I know she's weak and all that, Mrs. Tancred, but she does try damned hard to do better. You've no idea. She isn't made the same way as you, you know, and she's still suffering from the after-effects of ten years

## *Lean Brown Men*

on her back. If you go spreading this yarn about the place—

‘Tshut!’ she interrupted me. And without another word she passed through the open door, and was gone.

Sore and desperate, I followed her after a couple of seconds’ vacillation. I think I was going to call her again, but somehow the sight of that ungainly, masculine figure striding down the now moonlit drive unmanned me and made me pause. And then, as I stood hesitating, Mary opened the door of her room and joined me on the veranda. She spoke no word, but simply stood there beside me watching the fast disappearing figure. We saw it reach the end of the drive and wheel left along the dusty road.

I took Mary by the arm, and in silence steered her back towards her room. She was absolutely calm and collected now, but for the life of me I could find nothing to say to her.

We went inside.

I was just in the act of closing the veranda door behind us, when a shot and a cry rang out from the roadway. Then another shot—and another—and then a confused medley of grunts, groans, and scuffling feet.

“Mrs. Tancred!” cried Mary sharply, clutching my arm. “Oh, my God! The Raghza Khel——”

And before I could stop her she had caught up her ridiculous little pistol from the dressing-table and was flying barefooted down the drive.

## *The Bent Banana*

To seize my own revolver, which was in my room, cost me a matter of seconds, and then I pounded after her, yelling to her to stop. But Mary paid not the slightest heed, and flew on like the wind. I still had not caught her up by the time she reached the road, and she rounded the corner of the drive like a wild-boar jinking.

A couple of seconds later I gained the road and quickly took stock of the situation. A dozen yards to the left was Mrs. Tancred, her back against a garden wall, trying to keep at bay no fewer than five Raghza Khel, while two more of her assailants lay writhing on the ground. Even as I looked her revolver spoke again, and another man fell; but at that moment Mrs. Tancred fell too, stabbed in the side. At least three more knives found their mark in her as she went down—but at that instant Mary opened fire with her little automatic and it poured forth a rain of lead. Then I came up, and between us, firing at point-blank range, we shot down every one of the assassins. In considerably less time than it takes to record the fact, all seven of them lay dead or incapacitated in a semi-circle around Mrs. Tancred.

Simultaneously, lights and voices began to stir in the near-by bungalows, and men in pyjamas came running from every direction. We lifted the unconscious woman from where she lay, and carried her into the McOstriches' bungalow, just over the way. We laid her on a couch, and

## *Lean Brown Men*

Colonel McOstrich was at his job almost before we had set her down

While he tried frantically to stanch her many wounds his wife brought brandy, a drop of which we managed to force between the pale lips. Presently Mrs. Tancred's eyelids flickered, and in due course she opened her eyes.

"They've got me, blast 'em!" we heard her whisper, very low.

"Don't talk!" enjoined McOstrich gently. "Try to swallow this, and lie still."

But Mrs. Tancred shook her head, and her eyes travelled slowly round the group of us standing there. They came to rest on Mary Ballard, and for the first time I saw a little glimmer of warmth come into them.

"H'm. Well, *you're* cured, anyway," I heard her mutter, distinctly but with a great effort; and Mary bowed her head and nodded. "Good girl!" added Mrs. Tancred, in a whisper.

"Ssh! You really mustn't talk," begged Colonel McOstrich again.

Mrs. Tancred switched her gaze to him for a split second before she closed her eyes. Then—

"Tshut!" she breathed sharply; and died.

## VIII

Later that morning Colonel McOstrich arrived at my office and asked to see me. I was in the midst of completing the hurried arrangements

## *The Bent Banana*

for Mrs. Tancred's funeral, which, with a fine disregard for the regulations, the Brigadier had decreed should take place with more or less full military honours. After all, she had virtually commanded the Regiment, and had died a gallant death at the hands of our enemies, so it seemed only decent to speed her on her way with due ceremony.

"It's about the death certificate," McOstrich began, carefully closing the door behind him. "You see, I've got to state the cause of death, and I'm in a slight difficulty about it. D'ye mind telling me, Darell, before we go any further, what your own views on the subject may be?"

"Cause of death?" I repeated in surprise. "Why, surely there can be no two opinions about that, sir?"

"But there can," the Colonel replied quietly.

"But—Good God!" I protested, "you yourself saw her die. You know as well as I do that she was stabbed to ribbons!"

"Yes, I know that," agreed the doctor, with a queer little smile. "But the trouble is, d'ye see, that Mrs. Tancred did not die of those same knife-wounds, as it happens."

"What! But, dammit, sir, you *saw* her die!"

"I saw her die," he admitted, "and I saw as many as five knife-wounds in her. But I repeat that she didn't die of 'em. Four of them were quite superficial, as a matter of fact. The fifth would have killed her within half an hour, but

## *Lean Brown Men*

it so happens that she did not live long enough for that to happen."

Colonel McOstrich fumbled in the pocket of his tunic and produced a little pill-box, which he placed on the table between us.

"Mrs. Tancred was shot," he went on decisively, "and in that box is the bullet that killed her. I know what I'm talking about, for I myself extracted it from her aorta less than an hour ago. D'ye see, Darell, for technical reasons that I needn't go into, I wasn't happy about those knife-wounds. She died too quickly. So, being of an inquiring turn of mind, I thought I'd investigate; and that bullet is the result. D'ye mind taking a peep at it?"

Too amazed to speak, I took off the lid of the box and examined the grisly exhibit. My heart almost leapt into my mouth when I saw it, for it was a tiny pointed cylinder of .22 calibre. . . .

"Well?" asked the Colonel gently, ending an electric silence.

"My God, the Bent Banana!" I whispered, lifting my eyes from the bullet.

"H'm. I guessed as much, but I just wanted to make surc," he commented. "No possible doubt, I suppose?"

I shook my head.

"No possible doubt, sir," I confirmed. "Mrs. Tancred and I both carried .450 Service revolvers, and the Raghza Khel had rifles, .303 or thereabouts—though, as a matter of fact, they didn't fire a shot."

## *The Bent Banana*

"Right. So that's that."

"But what are you going to do about it?" I cried in agitation. "Surely you're not going to let this come out? It was an accident, Colonel—it *must* have been an accident! She couldn't have——"

My powers of speech seemed to dry up, and for a few seconds Colonel McOstrich and I looked each other squarely in the eyes. Then he drew a piece of paper from his pocket, and dipped one of my pens in the ink-well.

Fascinated, I watched him as he wrote. When it was done, he blotted the sheet deliberately and passed it over to me in silence. I saw that it was a printed form, and that in a space marked "Cause of death" he had written: "Primary—knife-wounds inflicted by certain Pathans unknown; Secondary—hæmorrhage."

With a sigh of relief I handed it back to him, and opened my mouth to thank him. He cut me short.

"All I ask in return is that you'll keep your mouth very firmly shut for the next ten years at least," he said. "I could get into extremely hot water if this ever came out. But so would the Bent Banana, and it seems to me, so it does, that this is one of those occasions when the old question of 'Should a doctor tell?' has only one answer. Don't you agree?"

"I certainly do," I assured him fervently.



### *Lean Brown Men*

“ Besides, it isn’t as if you were hiding anything criminal, sir. It *was* an accident.”

Colonel McOstrich folded up the death-certificate and replaced it in his pocket.

“ I’ll take your word for it,” he remarked drily.  
“ Come over to the Club and have some beer ! ”

## Book V

### “BUMPH”

#### I

A FEW days after his ninetieth birthday, my Uncle James—who is really my great-uncle, and who has already begun to feature in the history-books as Darell of Darellpur—sent me a picture-postcard.

Its obverse depicted a young lady, not unlike a Victorian barmaid, entangled in a mess of violets, ivy-leaves, pink convolvuli, and yellow hair, and presenting her chastely draped period bust as a target for the arrow of a fat, pink Cupid ; while in raised letters of vermilion tinsel was inscribed the rune : IF YOU LOVE ME AS I LOVE YOU, O LET US EVER BILL AND COO !

The reverse of the card was less decorative, but more to the point ; just my name and club address, and a dozen words in Uncle James’s aged copperplate—“*Thanks fr yr good wishes. Glad if you c<sup>d</sup> come down fr few days soon.—J. D.*”

This embarrassing missive, the nakedness of which the hall-porter had tactfully shrouded in a club envelope, reached me in company with a typically distressing communication from my

## *Lean Brown Men*

bank. With twelve days of the month still to run, it seemed that my current account was already in sore straits ; so I adjourned to the deserted library and went into Committee of Ways and Means. Having appreciated the situation (as they say at the Staff College), I concluded that the sooner I accepted Uncle James's invitation the better. Despite his age and his deplorable taste in stationery, he has always been a good friend to me, and he does one well in a quiet way.

A trunk-call elicited the information from his butler that Sir James would be pleased to see me as soon as I could make it convenient to arrive. So the very next day I put a suitcase in the back of my car and made tracks through Surrey and the Weald, arriving at the old grey house under Crowborough Beacon in good time for luncheon.

I found my great-uncle enjoying the warm sunshine in his old-world garden ; a lithe little scrap of a man still, who might easily have passed for twenty years younger than he really was. Time had not wholly bleached the Indian tan from his face, and the neat white moustache was still that of Lieutenant-General Sir James Straker Darell, K.C.B. When first I sighted him he was reading *The Times* through a remarkably modern pair of tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses, but no sooner was he aware of my approach than he discarded them in favour of the famous monocle of other days.

“ *Bumph* ”

“ Pleased ter see yer, Marcus, me boy,” he growled, as we shook hands. “ Good of yer ter come ser soon. Dashed good, dammit ! Sit yer down and have some beer. Brown ale, lager, pilsener, or stout ? Lager ? Well, I dare say y’re right, this weather. I’ll join yer.—Two lagers, Bromhead,” he instructed the hovering butler ; “ and don’t forget ter ice the mugs, or yer’ll get what’s coming to yer ! ”

“ New butler ? ” I inquired, as the man went off.

“ Only acting, thank God ! ” replied Uncle James, waving me into a chair. “ Smith’s on leave, and this feller’s going through the motions of taking his place. Bromhead, he calls himself. Muttonhead, *I* call him, when I remember. . . . What d’yer think the swine did, his very first day ? Put me beer in a glass—a glass, mark yer, when there must be thirty or forty mugs about the place—and a glass, dammit, that’d just been washed up in hot water ! Gad, I made the fool drink it himself, just ter teach him. . . . ”

We lunched presently under the trees, and I was amazed at the old chap’s appetite and ability. Iced soup, cold chicken, and stewed plums he disposed of without turning a hair, the whole washed down by a second pint of lager. And afterwards he lit a black cheroot, the fellow of which discretion caused me soon to throw away half-smoked.

“ You’re astoundingly fit, Uncle,” I ventured, with sincere admiration.

## *Lean Brown Men*

He shrugged his shoulders. "I am," he agreed ; " but I'm ninety years of age, Marcus, and all good things come to an end, yer know. That's what I wanted ter see yer about, partly. When d'yer go back ter India ? "

" I've another couple of months yet," I told him.

" On furlough pay, hey ? " Uncle James regarded me speculatively through his monocle, and I nodded lugubriously. " What does that amount to, these days ? " he added.

I named the miserable figure.

" Any plans ? "

" None, Uncle James."

" Good ! Then how'd yer like ter take a job ? " he barked. " Say, eight quid a week and yer keep. Any good, hey ? "

" All the good in the world, if it's anything I know how to do. Between ourselves, sir, I'm bored stiff with my leave, and too broke to do anything about it. As I suppose you know, Sheila and Adrian sailed last week, and I've been almost wishing I'd scrapped the rest of my leave and gone with them. What's the job, may I ask ? "

" Bumph," was the laconic reply. " Papers, letters, documents—five great trunks full of 'em. Thirty years ago, when I retired, I was going ter write me autobiography, so I brought home all the bumph I could lay my hands on. I've never written it, and it's too late now ; but I've come ter the conclusion that most of this bumph

## “ *Bumph* ”

had better predecease me, fer it'd create a breach of the peace if it got inter wrong hands. Anyhow, I want ter get it squared up before I die, Marcus, and I'd like yer help, fer I'm too old ter go fossicking about in the attic. What d'yer say? Eight quid a week, and yer keep.”

“ My dear Uncle, I'd be delighted,” I assured him ; “ but I would never dream of taking a salary from you. It'd be a pleasure, honestly. If you care to put me up for the duration of the job, that's all I ask.”

“ H'm. That's very civil of yer. . . . D'yer still play polo ? ”

“ When I can,” I said, rather at a loss to follow. “ Can't afford Ranelagh or Hurlingham, of course, but in India——”

“ What d'yer pay fer a pony these days ? ”

“ Oh, I only play cheap country-breds. A thousand rupees at the outside.”

“ Right ! Stay here fer the next few weeks and help with me *bumph*, and I'll ship yer a sound Irish thoroughbred, carriage paid. That do ? ”

“ But, really, Uncle James——”

“ *Chup !* Yer can start ter-morrer morning.”

## II

My great-uncle had not exaggerated when he spoke of having brought from India sufficient material for his autobiography. Rather had

## *Lean Brown Men*

he understated the position ; for it seemed to me, after a cursory glance through the paper-crammed boxes, that one could have also compiled therefrom a pretty detailed history of Northern India, not to mention a book of revelations that would have scandalized the Empire. Many of the faded, yellow documents went back to the eighteen-sixties, and seemed more like pages from an historical romance than records of actual happenings. They fascinated me, and I read each one with eager interest. Their quaint, old-fashioned wording intrigued me, as did the casual mention of names now famous in history and of places where I myself had served.

I tried to picture these men and places as they were in those distant days. Everything must have been on such a small scale then, compared with to-day ; everything, that is, except the British Officer's responsibility, which was a hundred times greater. Nowadays there is always a superior with whom one can get in touch by telegraph or wireless, should any unusual situation arise. But when the young Captain James Darell, at the head of his newly raised regiment of Darell's Horse, was sent off on a roving commission in that wild tract of frontier territory in the midst of which the cantonment of Darellpur now stands, he was to all intents and purposes completely cut off from intercourse with the authorities. For month after month, it seemed, he and his men had

*“ Bumph ”*

ranged that unfriendly land, living on the country, subduing the local tribes, and adding mile upon mile of Asia to the territorial possessions of the Queen-Empress.

Tackling a trunk at a time, I set to work to sort the scattered papers into piles, each dealing with a specific subject. This done, I would carry each pile in succession to Uncle James, who would run through the documents comprising it, pausing now and then to give vent to a reminiscent chuckle or a snort of indignation as the memory of some half-forgotten incident came back to him. Sometimes he would detain me awhile to recount, with racy and even malicious humour, the inner history of some such happening. And in the evenings, when my work was done, the old chap would often keep me amused for hours after he should have been in bed.

The only thing that distressed me was that every single paper found its way, sooner or later, to the bonfire which Uncle James kept burning in the garden. More than once I remonstrated with him, arguing that certain of them should be preserved for posterity. But he only snorted and piled the bonfire higher. With a single exception, every document suffered this fate.

Apart from this one, there were no private papers in Uncle James's trunks. At the age of ninety he was still a notoriously confirmed bachelor, so I was scarcely disappointed at



## *Lean Brown Men*

finding no bundles of faded love-letters among his relics of the past. As a matter of fact, though, his failure to marry had always been a matter of surprise and conjecture in the family, because in his younger days he had been remarkably good-looking, and he was far from being a misogynist. But there it was.

I was half-way through my scrutiny of the third trunk when I came across that solitary sheet of notepaper. I very nearly missed it altogether, for it had slipped between the foolscap folios on which were recorded the proceedings of a Field General Court-Martial, and it was only through my becoming interested in the said proceedings that I made the discovery.

It was not a complete letter. It was, in fact, merely the last sheet of a missive that had apparently covered two or more pages, and, though I searched most diligently, I could not find the rest of it. The relic itself bore very little writing : only the concluding sentences of the letter, and the signature. But these were of such a character, so different from all the other papers in my great-uncle's hoard, that they arrested my attention at once and held it for some time to come.

Both the paper and the handwriting suggested femininity, and this impression was amply confirmed when I read what was written there. I give the words in full :

“ *Bumph* ”

. . . at once, for we leave Mooltan for Rawul Pindee on the 10th. God grant that all may befall as we so ardently desire, my dearest James. And may He watch over us both and bring to naught all the manifold dangers and difficulties which beset us !

Ever thy most loving, devoted

CLARE.

Alone in the attic I read and re-read these words from the past for a considerable space of time before I could make up my mind what to do about them. It will be understood that my position was, to say the least, peculiar. It was through no fault of mine that I had unearthed and read words never intended for my eyes, since Uncle James was actually employing me *ad hoc*. I had had no compunction about reading documents that belonged to the category of official secrets ; but I must confess that I felt uncomfortable at having violated this particular sanctuary.

I must admit, though, that this sensation of sacrilege did not come to me straightaway. At first I was amused, and perhaps a little surprised. Somehow it seemed almost ludicrous that any woman should have written thus to good old Uncle James, that bachelor of bachelors : and my first inclination was to confront him suddenly with this evidence of a youthful infatuation and to pull his leg unmercifully. I'd have some fun at his expense, I told myself. . . . And then came the realization that it was a thousand to one against his having any idea

## *Lean Brown Men*

that this ancient scrap of paper lay hidden amongst his boxes of "bumph," and that its resurrection was perhaps a matter calling for diplomacy rather than banter. The fragment might so easily be the relic of a tragedy rather than of a comedy. Indeed, since Uncle James had certainly never married, it was obvious that something had gone wrong with *l'affaire Clare*. And one can never be sure how thoroughly Time has done its work.

I debated the relative merits of the three courses that appeared to be open to me. I might destroy the letter. I might replace it between the leaves of the court-martial proceedings where I had found it. Or I might hand it to Uncle James as a matter of course along with another batch of papers. The first proposal seemed vaguely dishonest and indefensible; while the last was difficult of achievement, since, as I have said, it was my custom to docket together all the papers relating to a given subject—and I could not make this letter fit in with any others. So in the end I slipped it back amongst the court-martial papers, leaving it to Fate to decide whether or not my great-uncle should come across it for himself.

Or so I thought. But Fate is a remarkably perverse lady, and when I was handing that pile of documents to Uncle James, half an hour later, the sheet of notepaper floated straight out of its covers and came to rest on the lap of its original addressee. He picked it up and examined it

“ *Bumph* ”

through his monocle. I stood by, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

“ God bless my soul ! ” growled Uncle James, looking from the paper to me with fierce astonishment. “ Where the devil did yer get this from, hey ? What the—— ? ”

“ I found it tucked away in these court-martial papers, sir,” I broke in. “ There doesn’t seem to be any more of it, so I thought I’d better put it back where I found it.”

For a few moments Uncle James made no comment. He just stared incredulously at the sheet of notepaper, scrutinizing it back and front, and I noticed that his fingers were trembling slightly. Then he puffed out his cheeks and exhaled windily.

“ What about some beer ? ” he said hopefully. “ I’ve got the devil of a thirst from that darned bonfire. Brown ale, lager, pilsener, or stout ? No, dammit, what about some Audit ale ? Tell that fool Muttonhead, will yer, Marcus ? Perhaps yer’d better go down ter the cellar with him and make sure he gets the right stuff. And see that he ices the mugs, there’s a good feller. . . . ”

Gladly enough, I made my escape on this errand. When I returned with the ale Uncle James had resumed his scrutiny of some other documents as if nothing had happened. I noticed, however, that the piece of notepaper was anchored down on the garden-table by means of his spectacle-case.

## *Lean Brown Men*

After a few appreciative sips he nodded towards it and addressed me.

"Funny, running across that," he said. "I remember now, I burned the rest of that letter a good fifty years ago—at Kohat, I think it was. Couldn't find that last sheet. I suppose it must have got mixed up with this other bumph. Funny business, Marcus. Did yer read it?"

"Yes, sir," I admitted frankly. "I wouldn't have done so if I'd realized it was a private letter, but——"

"That's all right," he interrupted. "Yer weren't ter know. In a way, I'm glad ter see it again, though I had no idea it was still in existence. . . . Yer know Darellpur, Marcus. Ever been up the Badraga Valley from there?"

"Dozens of times," I said, nodding.

"D'yer know Fort Clare?"

"Lord, yes, rather! Spent nearly three months there during the last Mirza Khel show. Why, is there any connection——?"

"I built Fort Clare in '68, and named it after Clare Daubeney, who wrote that letter. Matter of fact, I was at Fort Clare when she wrote it, though she didn't know then that I'd given her name to it. She and I were—er—rather sweet on each other about then."

"Clare *Daubeney*, did you say, sir?" I asked, puzzled.

"Eh? Yes, Clare Daubeney. Why?"

"Well, you see, that court-martial was on a man named Daubeney," I said.

*“ Bumph ”*

“ Gad, is that so ? ” Uncle James looked quite startled. “ I hadn’t looked at it yet. H’m. That accounts fer it, I suppose. I used ter keep all those papers tergether once.” He dug out the documents from the pile and scanned the heading. “ Yes, that’s right : Captain John Lander Daubeney. That was her husband, Marcus.”

I grunted, but said nothing. I was somewhat taken aback, to tell the truth, for it had not occurred to me either that Uncle James’s lady-love had been a married woman or that there was any connection between the letter and the court-martial papers. What with one thing and another, a discreet silence seemed indicated. I shot a quick glance at my great-uncle, but he had buried his face, monocle and all, deep in a massive silver tankard.

“ Damned unpleasant business,” he volunteered presently, as he wiped his lips. “ Damned unpleasant. Want ter hear about it ? ”

“ That’s up to you, sir,” I replied, as indifferently as I could. (Needless to say, I wanted to hear very badly, but in the circumstances it would have been indecent to display too much curiosity.) “ I’d be very interested, of course, but——”

“ Remind me after dinner ter-night,” he interrupted, “ and I’ll tell yer. It may be a lesson to yer—a warning against trying ter combine business with pleasure. . . . That’s what I tried ter do, and a fine old hash I made of it. What about another bottle of ale ? ”

III

"Love," said my Uncle James, setting down his glass of port on a table beside his armchair, "may be all very well fer civilians and sailors, but there ought to be a regulation against soldiers having any truck with it. Mark yer, when I say soldiers, I mean Soldiers. Love's all right for Staff-wallahs and Commissariat fellers who're reduced ter poodle-faking fer want of a better job, but yer real Soldier ought ter keep clear of it. *I* was a Soldier, and *I* had a go at it, and look what happened! Marcus, me boy, take me tip and leave it alone!"

I made a noise which I hoped might be mistaken for agreement. As a matter of fact, there was a girl in India whom I was hoping to make my bride within the next six months, but as we were not yet officially engaged I had not seen fit to broadcast the news.

"I'll tell yer how it happened," Uncle James went on. "It all started in Multan, when I was raising Darrell's Horse fer our first job on the Frontier. I was recruiting Mussulmans from that district, yer see, and of course I made me first headquarters in the cantonment. Clare's father was surgeon-major at the hospital there—feller named Disney. Clare was about twenty then, a slim little slip of a girl with black hair and blue eyes, and a face that brought yer heart inter yer mouth. Pretty? Dammit, sir, she was

the prettiest girl I've ever clapped eyes on in all me ninety years, devil take me if she wasn't! What's more, she was a good girl without being goody, and a modest girl without being a prude. Yer don't find that sort nowadays, Marcus. The race is extinct, and so much the worse fer you young fellers."

I was tempted to intervene with the remark that his description fitted to perfection my own Barbara Barlowe, but I contrived to convert my protest into another non-committal grunt.

"Needless ter say, every young feller in Multan was after Clare," my great-uncle resumed, "but not one of 'em stood a chance with her except John Daubeney and meself. We were much of an age, Daubeney and I—about five- or six-and-twenty then—but that was the only thing we had in common. Quite apart from our rivalry over Clare, I never could stand that feller, Marcus. He had too much money, and he didn't spend it well. He was a picture-book soldier, if yer know what I mean: tall, good-looking, and all that; a swaggering young bounder with light eyes, like one of these pestilential film-stars yer see all over the placards these days. On the face of it, he had the advantage of me with Clare, for I had nothing but me pay, and I was putting threequarters of that inter Darell's Horse. Everyone said she'd marry John Daubeney; everyone, that is, except Clare herself, who fer some reason favoured me. Why the devil she should have done so it's beyond me ter



## *Lean Brown Men*

say, but, naturally, I didn't stop ter worry about that. But the trouble was, yer see, that Daubeny had money and I hadn't, and money was a big argument where old Disney was concerned. *He* was as poor as a slum curate, fer he drank half his pay and gambled away three-quarters of the rcmainder. A regular hard case was Surgeon-Major Disney, and John Daubeny was a man after his own heart. They drank and gambled, and got up ter all sorts of devilry tergether, and Daubeny used ter lend him money, without pressing fer repayment. Yer needn't think Daubeny did this out of friendship fer the doctor. That's what he made out it was, of course, but actually he was just loading the dice against me.

"Mind yer, I don't say fer a moment that old Disney saw it in that light. He was a simple old sinner, and, though he was weak as water, I've always held out that he never intended ter sell his own daughter. He and Clare were very devoted to each other, especially as Clare's mother had died giving birth to her, and she was the only child. I'm sure Clare herself never realized what an old devil her father was, fer most of his dissipation took place in Daubeny's bungalow long after she was in bed and asleep. There used ter be some fine talcs of the goings-on in the small hours of the morning, but I'll swear Clare knew nothing about 'em."

Uncle James paused to drink off his port and refill our glasses. Then he went on again.

“ *Bumph* ”

“ Well, yer see how matters stood, Marcus, me boy? Daubeney and I were hot rivals fer Clare. Clare loved me, but her father naturally thought nothing of me compared with Daubeney. From a material point of view he wasn’t far wrong, I must say. I couldn’t afford ter keep a wife, and in any case I was just off ter the Frontier with me regiment, while Daubeney had a nice soft staff-job in Multan. If I’d married Clare I couldn’t have taken her where I was going, fer I was under orders to annex and police a district that was a witch’s cauldron of trouble and unrest.

“ So things looked pretty hopeless fer Clare and me, d’yer see. Still, we were fond of each other, and Clare swore she’d wait till things got better. Even if I had no money then, me prospects weren’t too bad, fer I’d been promised that if I made good on the Border I could more or less have me pick of any well-paid jobs that happened ter be going. I reckoned that eighteen months or two years ought ter decide matters one way or t’other, and, as Clare and I were both young, we weren’t afraid of waiting. So one fine morn-ing I rode away from Multan at the head of Darell’s Horse, the proudest man in India. . . . Yer don’t get chances like that ter-day, Marcus. There was I, aged six-and-twenty, a captain and brevet-major, commanding me own regiment, six hundred strong. What’s more, I knew me job and felt confident that I could do it. And by way of incentive I had promotion, honours, and Clare ter look forward to.”

## *Lean Brown Men*

“Grand days, sir !” I put in, as Uncle James paused again to sip his port.

“Grand days !” he confirmed, wiping his moustache. “But chances like that were open to almost any young feller who took his job seriously and had his wits about him. . . . Well, off we went ter the Frontier, Marcus, and the history-books will tell yer what we did there—more or less. Never mind that now ; I’m talking about me affair with Clare Disney. Next thing I knew about that was eight or nine months later, when I got a chit from her signed Clare Daubeney. . . . There : what d’yer think about that, hey?”

## IV

“Tough luck, Uncle James,” I murmured sympathetically. The phrase sounded weak and inadequate, but I did not know what else to say. I could not help feeling rather uncomfortable, even though my great-uncle had been barking out his story in a voice quite devoid of emotion, and I had, of course, long foreseen this last development.

“I’ll tell yer what had happened,” he went on. “Mark yer, I didn’t gather this from Clare’s letter, and it was only a good while afterwards that I discovered the inner history of the affair. Clare merely told me she had married Daubeney against her will, ter help her father out of difficulties, and she was broken-hearted about it all.

“ *Bumph* ”

At the time, of course, I thought she meant the usual financial difficulties, and I tell yer I was pretty sore about things, fer before I left Multan I'd made her promise me she wouldn't sacrifice herself to her father's extravagance. But later on I found out that old Disney's trouble had been far more serious than that."

It was an unsavoury tale that Uncle James proceeded to unfold to me—the tale of the bartering of Clare. Being a fair-minded man, he made no suggestion that Daubeney had deliberately plotted to bring about the crisis, nor indeed would that appear to have been possible ; but there can be little doubt that Uncle James's rival had foreseen the possibility of some such emergency arising and had made his plans accordingly. But the crisis itself arrived in the natural course of events. Its main ingredients were an emergency operation at midnight, a hopelessly drunken surgeon, a "cooked" death-certificate, and considerable perjury at the subsequent Court of Inquiry. Daubeney, himself the chief author of the dissolute old doctor's condition at the critical time, spared neither money nor pains to save Surgeon-Major Disney's commission. He it was who bribed the native hospital staff into silence, and who bore unblushing testimony to the surgeon's sobriety in face of all insinuations to the contrary. Daubeney played his cards coolly and with skill—and won the game. Only when the puzzled Court had given Disney the benefit of the doubt did Daubeney unmask his motive.

## *Lean Brown Men*

"It was sheer blackmail, of course," said Uncle James, with heat. "Blackmail of the dirtiest kind, but he knew his man too well to shirk the risk of having his bluff called. The price of his continued silence was Clare: and it'll give yer some idea of what sort of feller he was when I tell yer that it was Clare herself that he blackmailed, rather than the old man. And—well, Clare adored her father, d'yer see, and who's ter blame her for throwing her hand in? Mark yer, I blamed her meself ter begin with, before I knew the circumstances. Devilish sore I was, and I swore I'd never have any more truck with women. But soon after that me second-in-command got killed; and Colam, the man they sent ter replace him, had been in Multan while the Disney case was on, and I got the full facts from him. That put a different complexion on the matter, of course, so I wrote ter Clare, and she rather reluctantly confirmed what Colam had told me. I'd also asked her another straight question, and she gave me a straight enough answer to that as well. In a word, she still loved me, and would be ready ter come ter me if ever the chance occurred. Those were her words, Marcus, and if yer use yer brain yer'll see what they implied."

"In the event of her becoming a widow, for instance," I hazarded.

"Yes. Or even in the event of her father dying. Of course, that second way would have meant a scandal, but I think she was quite ready ter face that. 'Matter of fact, fer quite a time

“ *Bumph* ”

that seemed ter me the more likely way, fer I heard that old Disney was drinking harder than ever since his narrow escape, ter drown the memory of it, so ter speak. With him out of the way of earthly troubles, Clare was quite ready ter leave her husband and come ter me, and devil take the consequences ! What those consequences would have been it'd be difficult ter say. Normally, of course, I'd have had ter send in me papers and clear out, but I was banking on the good work I was doing on the Border ter temper the wind a bit when the storm broke.

“Yer see, me stock was pretty high just about then. Darell's Horse had broken new country, and I'd already annexed every yard between the Indus and the Zogha rivers ; and in the end, as yer know, I presented the Queen with the whole of the Badraga Valley, and the Zogha up as far as Ghanna Tangi. The Commander-in-Chief was as pleased as Punch with me, and I used ter get a regular love-letter from him every time a messenger could find us—yer've probably come across some of them amongst me bumph, haven't yer ? I'd been promoted major, and I'd had the tip that I was in fer a brevet lieutenant-colonelcy the next time Her Majesty was handing 'em out. Also, fer a youngster, I was in pretty good standing with John Lawrence, the Governor-General.

“ Still, I'm not saying that I liked the idea of running off with another man's wife, even though that man was a cad and his wife was *my* Clare,

## *Lean Brown Men*

and fer a long time I didn't do anything about it. I was too busy, anyhow. I'd been having a lot of trouble with the Mirza Khel, and I had an anxious time trying ter prevent them from burying the hatchet with neighbouring enemies, the Tikhannis, and putting up a combined resistance to my little force. Clare and I wrote to each other as often as we could, but yer can imagine what the mails were like in those days. If I got one mail in six or eight weeks I thought myself lucky. Fer a long time—a year or fifteen months, say—her letters showed that she was making the best of a bad job and trying ter reconcile herself ter being Daubenys's wife, but, though she never complained, I could see she was far from happy. They were still at Multan, and Clare took some kind of comfort from being near her father."

Uncle James threw away the butt of his third cheroot since dinner, and lit a fourth. It was already nearly midnight, but he showed no signs of fatigue. I knew well enough that his own butler, Smith, made a point of getting the old chap to bed by ten every night, but the *locum*, "Muttonhead," lacked the nerve to take a strong line. So, to be candid, did I, though my sensation of guilt increased as the hands of the clock crept round.

"It's early yet," my host's voice broke in, contradicting my unspoken thoughts. "I don't hold with Smith and his fads. It's time fer a whisky and soda, though. Too much of this

“ *Bumph* ”

port gums up yer vitals and gives yer a nasty hang-over, as these pestilential Americans say. A good stiff Scotch flushes yer liver and makes yer as right as a robin. Give me one, and help yerself, will yer ? ”

Doubtful as I was with regard to the truth of my great-uncle's pharmaceutical postulates, I did as he bade me. I consoled myself with the thought that if his ideas had already delivered him safe and sound at the ripe old age of ninety, it was not for a comparative youngster like myself to attempt his conversion.

V

“ Well, and so things went on till—let's see—yes, it'd be '69,” Uncle James resumed, shortly afterwards, “ and then things started ter happen all at once, as they always do. First of all, old Surgeon-Major Disney died at last—abscess on the liver, or something of the kind—and poor Clare was so cut-up about it that I thought from her letters that she'd be the next ter go. Fer the time being, at any rate, there was no talk of her leaving her husband and coming ter me, and in any case I couldn't have done with her just then, fer I had me hands full and they were likely ter get fuller every day. Me spies told me that the alliance between the Mirza Khel and the Tikhannis would probably be ratified at any moment, and that meant there'd be hell let loose



## *Lean Brown Men*

on my part of the Border. A short time before, I'd been on the point of suggesting to Headquarters that Darrell's Horse had had their bellyful of fighting since they were raised, and that a spell in civilization wouldn't do 'em any harm, but, of course, that was out of the question now. In fact, the situation looked so serious that I'd come ter see that I couldn't hold the country I'd annexed without help ; and, although it went badly against the grain, I sent a chit ter the General saying he'd better reinforce me with another regiment at once. Gad, I hated doing that, Marcus, but it was no good trying to run a show like that unless yer were prepared ter look facts in the face.

" Three weeks later, just as the storm was about ter burst, up rides a squadron of Sam Browne's Cavalry with a chit from the General to say that was all he could spare fer the moment, because the Chigha Khel were on the war-path round Sarhadipur way, and the Raghza Khel were threatening Retistan. However, he said he was whistling up another brigade from the Punjab, and that I was ter hold on like grim death till adequate reinforcements reached me. This news wasn't too good, but, of course, I set out to do what I could. By that time I'd built three forts in my district : Fort Clare in the Badraga Valley ; Fort Cardus—named after that grand old Piffer brigadier—in the Zogha Valley ; and Fort Victoria—after Her Majesty—a mile or two east of the junction of the two valleys——"

“ *Bumph* ”

“ Now known as Fort Darell,” I put in quietly, “ by Her Majesty’s special command. The old fort still stands at the north-west corner of Darellpur cantonment. It’s used as an ammunition dump.”

Uncle James snorted. “ Yer may be right,” he growled uncomfortably, “ but in those days it was Fort Victoria, and the nearest cantonment was a hundred and fifteen miles away. Right out in the blue it was, in as nasty a bit of country as I’d ever clapped eyes on. As yer know, the three forts form a sort of equilateral triangle : Victoria at the apex, lying towards India, and Clare and Cardus at the points of the base, each about twenty miles up its particular valley. The idea was, yer see, that Victoria should act as a base for reinforcing either or both of the others.

“ Well, ter cut a long story short, I now had five squadrons ter hold these three forts, which were the only places I could hope ter hang on to if the Mirza Khel and Tikhannis got tergether and made ’emselves unpleasant. Of the three, Fort Clare struck me as the most important at that time, because the Badraga Valley was the tribal boundary and offered the best and easiest route fer their combined *lashkars* ter come east by. I reckoned there wouldn’t be much trouble up the Zogha, so I detailed only one squadron ter garrison Fort Cardus, and put two each in Clare and Victoria. I took up me own headquarters in Clare, fer in those days a commander used ter keep well up in front, ter see what was

## *Lean Brown Men*

going on, instead of hanging about ten miles ter the rear like yer modern generals."

Uncle James's tone was so contumelious that I ventured a mild protest. I pointed out that modern methods of communication render it unnecessary for commanders to risk their lives in the front line.

"Well, yer may be right," he replied, waving his cheroot, "but in those days I wouldn't have dared ask me men ter defend a death-trap like Fort Clare without being there meself ter set a good example. Anyhow, I was there with 'A' and 'B' Squadrons of Darell's, and Colam, me second-in-command, had 'D' Squadron and the detachment of Sam Browne's at Fort Victoria. 'C' Squadron was at Fort Cardus, under a young cornet named Fitzhugh, whom I thought better of than cither of me other two subalterns. And so we settled down ter wait fer things ter happen.

"The next thing that did happen was the arrival of another messenger from Headquarters with a chit from the General, telling me ter keep me peeker up, and saying that the first of the reinforcements were already on the point of leaving Rawalpindi. But that meant we shouldn't see 'em for a month at least, I reckoned, and that was about twice as long as I felt we should be able to hold out. . . . And the same mail brought me a letter from Clare—that same letter, Mareus, that yer found the last page of this morning. I'll tell yer roughly what the rest of it was about.

“ *Bumph* ”

“ The most important thing was that John Daubeney, her husband, was in trouble—or at least under a cloud. Ter tell yer the truth, I never discovered exactly what the trouble was, but from what I gathered afterwards I imagine that old Disney’s death had loosened a few tongues that had hitherto kept silent on his account, and that people had begun ter see through Master Daubeney. Yer see, it wasn’t as if he made a model husband, by any means. Clare never complained in so many words, but fellers I met long afterwards, who had been in Multan at that time, told me some pretty queer stories. I won’t bother yer with ’em now ; but, even if they were only partly true, poor Clare must have endured a deal more than I gave her credit for. Anyhow, the upshot of it was, according to this letter I had from her, that Daubeney had been relieved of his staff-job and was under orders ter rejoin his regiment—the Doaba Lancers—at Rawalpindi straightaway. More ter the point, news had also reached Clare that the Doabas were mobilizing fer service on the Frontier, which meant that she would be staying in ’Pindi till they got back again. And as I’d already told her (before all this trouble started, of course) that I was hoping Darell’s Horse would soon be going down ter the Punjab fer a rest, it looked to her as if our luck had changed at last. At any rate, she’d be shot of her husband fer a year or two, and even if Darell’s weren’t actually sent ter ’Pindi, I shouldn’t be so very far away, and

## Lean Brown Men

we could at least see each other again and discuss our future course of action. I, for my part, being on the spot, knew there wasn't a chance of poor old Darell's Horse seeing the Punjab fer some time ter come ; in fact, I reckoned we'd be lucky if we ever saw India again—but Clare wasn't ter know that."

"No ; and this explains her hope that ' all may befall as we so ardently desire ' in her letter, Uncle James."

"Just so. But, as I say, when I got that letter I had no time ter waste on day-dreams of that kind, Marcus. I remember I did figure out a few dates at the time, and I came ter the conclusion that the Daubenys would have reached 'Pindi just about in time fer her husband ter rejoin the Doabas before they left. That was all ter the good, though I was worried at the idea of John Daubeny coming up ter my part of the world and perhaps being about ter cross me path again. Ycr can see what I mean, can't yer ? The sooner the cavalry from 'Pindi arrived ter relieve us, the better I'd be pleased—*always provided that Fate or the General didn't pick on John Daubeny ter relieve me personally.* As I've told yer, I never could stand that feller, and the dirty way he'd cheated me out of Clare made me dislike him worse than ever. It's bad enough ter covet a feller's wife, Marcus, without having ter owe yer life to him as well—and it seemed ter me that there was quite a chance of this happening. Still, there was nothing I could do about it.

“ *Bumph* ”

Even if I could have got another chit through ter the General, it wasn't my place ter dictate who should be sent ter relieve me ; besides, that'd have been a childish thing ter do. So far as I knew, Daubeney was as good a soldier as the next man, and yer can't have officers letting their private likes and dislikes influence their actions on active service. And then, I had me men ter think of, not ter mention the safety of Her Majesty's territory committed ter me charge. If it had been a personal matter I'd have died cheerfully rather than give Daubeney the satisfaction of saving me life ; but I knew I must take a bigger view of the situation than that, and be thankful fer any help that might reach me.”

“ But, Uncle James,” I could not help asking, “ what on earth made you so certain that out of a whole brigade of reinforcements the Doaba Lancers would be detailed to relieve you ? Or that, even if they were, you might owe your life to Daubeney rather than to any other officer ? ”

“ There yer've got me,” replied my great-uncle, with a gruff laugh. “ Y're quite right, of course. There was no reason whatever, except that it was just the sort of thing that *would* happen. I felt it in me bones, so ter speak.”

“ And were you right ? ”

“ Well, yes—and no. That's the whole point of this yarn, Marcus, and I haven't got to it yet. What about another peg of Scotch, ter swill the rest of that port away ? ”

VI

"Did yer ever come across a feller named Alefounder?" Uncle James demanded suddenly, as I was manipulating the siphon. "Hi! Don't drown me peg, dammit! I do like ter taste what I'm drinking."

"Sorry!" I apologized untruthfully, diverting the soda into my own glass. "Alefounder? Rum name, but it strikes a familiar chord, somehow. Ah, I'm thinking of a youngster in the Sappers. You'd mean his father, or even grandfather, presumably. It's a Service family."

"No—I mean young Alefounder; captain, I believe he is. Precocious young puppy; writes books pulling his betters ter pieces."

I could not resist a chuckle. "I know him, Uncle James. A bull-nosed little prig who wants his face pushed in."

"He wants his bottom spanked," amended Uncle James warmly. "Sapper, is he? H'm. That accounts fer it, I suppose. Never could stand Sappers, Marcus. Pestilential breed. Young Kipling was right with his 'Methodist, married, or mad' diagnosis, only he was wrong ter confine it to their colonels—but I expect he just put that in ter fill up the line. Anyhow, this young Alefounder feller had the sauce ter write a book about *me*, Marcus, and damme if it wasn't the most *pagal*-brained lot of claptrap

“ *Bumph* ”

I ever set eyes on ! Not worth the bump it was printed on. Did yer read it ? ”

I shook my head. “ I’m afraid we don’t regard Master Alefounder very seriously as a military historian, Uncle. Nobody takes any notice of his books. As a matter of fact, I did mean to get hold of a copy of this one, seeing that it was about you, but I’ve still never come across one. I take it I haven’t missed much. What was wrong with it, exactly ? ”

“ Wrong ! Damme, the difficulty is ter find anything right in it ! ” cried Uncle James indignantly. “ The fool starts off by calling me ‘ the late Sir James Darell ’—‘ the *late*,’ mark yer !—in his preface, and from there ter the end of the book he has his work cut out ter get one fact right out of every three. And even when he gets his facts right, his deductions would give a Brahmini bull the collywobbles. I tell yer, before I was half-way through that book I’d made up me mind ter write him a very stiff letter, but by the time I’d finished I’d come ter the conclusion that he was the sort of feller who’d only sell it to an autograph-hunter.”

“ He probably would have,” I remarked. “ I’ve only met him once, but he struck me as a leprous little toad. But what set you thinking about him, Uncle ? Did he drop an outsize brick about this ’69 show of yours ? ”

“ He did. He went wrong over his dates, his distances, and his numbers—but that’s only what yer’d expect from a Sapper, after all. I don’t



## *Lean Brown Men*

grumble about that so much ; but what does rile me is the way he pulls me whole plan of campaign to pieces. He says Darell's Horse was lucky ter get out of that mess without being cut ter atoms, and he's right enough there. But the pestilential young whipper-snapper then says I made a big mistake in shutting up me force in three small forts and trying ter hold them against seven or eight thousand Pathans. He says, if yer please, that I ought ter have kept in the open and used guerilla tactics, because, being cavalry, we had greater mobility than the enemy. D'yer ever hear such bunkum ? Is that the sort of thing they teach yer in the Service these days ? If so, God help England ! ”

“ It sounds utter piffle to me, Uncle,” I said soothingly. “ How the deuce could five squadrons take on the combined *lashkars* of two fair-sized tribes in the open ? ”

“ That's not the point,” argued my great-uncle, with a snort. “ Y're as bad as Alefounder, dammit ! The problem, ter my mind, was not whether me five squadrons could defeat the Mirza Khel and the Tikhannis in a pitched battle, or keep 'em on the hop by taking ter the hills, but whether me five squadrons could hold the newly annexed territory against all comers. *That* was the test. Look here, now ! I'd spent the last two years in taking over that bit of country in the name of the Queen-Empress. I'd fought the Mirza Khel, whose country it was, times without number—and I'd always come off best. I'd

“ *Bumph* ”

planted the British flag there. And I'd built three small mud forts at what I considered the strategically important points. Now, those three forts were, so ter speak, the only outward and visible signs of Her Majesty's sovereignty over the district, and ter abandon them at the first threat of trouble would have been tantamount ter abdication in the eyes of every brown man within a hundred miles—not only the enemy, but me own sowars as well. It wasn't a physical problem I was up against, so much as a moral one : what yer pestilential modern quacks would call psychological. Nowadays, it seems ter me, some people have queer ideas about what we used ter call national honour. But in those days there was a code which the Pathans understood as well as we did. And I knew, and the enemy knew, that the war fer sovereignty over that tract of land must be waged round Fort Clare, Fort Cardus, and Fort Victoria.”

“ So much for Comrade Alefounder ! ” I murmured. “ I'll try to explain it to him, the next time I see him.”

“ Rub his nose in it ! ” enjoined Uncle James succinctly. “ But I doubt if it'd do any good, fer even puppies aren't what they were in my day ! Well, anyhow, I hope yer understand the business fer yerself now. I had ter hang on ter those forts till relief came ; and, as I told yer, I figured that it'd be round about a month from the time when I had those letters from Clare and the General. As it turned out, I overestimated

## *Lean Brown Men*

the time by a few days, but it always pays a soldier ter be rather pessimistic. I knew it was going ter be a bit of a struggle, but that, after all, was what we were paid for. We were pretty well off fer rations, and we always had horse-flesh ter fall back on if the worst came ter the worst—fortunately, Darell's Horse were all Mussulmans in those days, so they had no fads about food. The water question was a bit more ticklish, but not acute. I'd sited each fort near a river, and diverted a stream ter flow under the walls into a big reservoir, holding enough ter water a squadron, men and horses, fer ten days or a fortnight. So long as the enemy didn't rumble what we'd done, all was well ; but they had only ter dam our feeder-channels ter put us in a bit of a hole. My chief worry was ammunition. We had enough ter last us three or four months at our normal rate of expenditure, but when y're besieged in a small fort by overwhelmingly superior forces y're apt ter exceed yer usual allowance pretty considerably.—Ever been through it, Marcus ? ”

“ Nothing on that scale, sir. When I was a subaltern I stood a three days' siege—if you can call it that—at Fort Marjorie in Retistan, but that was nothing. You see, what with metalled roads and motor transport all over the Border, that kind of thing doesn't happen much nowadays.”

“ I suppose not. And I suppose it's all fer the best, though life must be plaguy dull in those

*“ Bumph ”*

parts as a consequence. Well, I've told yer how we were situated at the beginning of the '69 show. I reckoned it was, as near as dammit, even betting whether we pulled through or not, though if I'd been a disinterested backer I'd have put a couple of sovereigns on the enemy's chances. Mark yer, I'm not saying I'd have willingly changed places with him, fer it's no light matter trying ter take a fort manned by well-armed sowars, even if yer outnumber them by twenty ter one. If yer had any artillery, of course, one good salvo would do the trick for yer, but the Mirza Khel and Tikhannis hadn't any field-guns, thank the Lord ! They had quite a few rifles, but most of them depended on jezails and blunderbusses, apart from their knives and swords.

“ No—there were only two ways they could take us : escalade and starvation. Primitive methods, I grant yer, but just as unpleasant fer the defenders as any of yer modern contraptions. I've told yer what I considered their chances of starving us out, but the question of escalade wasn't so easy fer me to assess in advance. The forts all had walls about twenty feet high, and all the time I'd been in that district I hadn't seen a ladder more than half that height. Still, if they had plenty of ten-footers there'd be nothing ter prevent them from joining 'em up in pairs, and a simultaneous attempt by a hundred or two ladders might take a bit of beating off. Then again, I knew that the Tikhannis came from a

## *Lean Brown Men*

well-wooded country, so they might have the foresight ter bring along some better equipment with them.

“ Well, yer know what happened, more or less. I’d been hoping the enemy would split his forces into three equal parts and attack all the forts simultaneously, but he had more sense than I’d given him credit for. He knew what he was up against, and he had the right idea about ‘concentration of forces.’ Between them, the two tribes mustered nearer eight thousand fighting men than seven, and they opened the ball on sound tactical lines by making their first lunge against the weakest part of my defences. I give ’em best fer that, Marcus. It’s just what I’d have done meself, if I’d been in their shoes. They’d found out—through spies, of course—that, whereas Fort Clare and Fort Victoria had two squadrons each, Fort Cardus had only one. As I told yer, I’d reckoned on them coming straight down the Badraga Valley and bumping Fort Clare first. But the devils outwitted me, and came down the Zogha instead.

“ Their approach must have been a masterly bit of work, fer they took poor Fitzhugh on the hop just before dawn one morning, battered in his main gate with a pine-tree that they’d brought from nearly fifty miles away—there were no trees of any size growing round about—and that was the end of ‘C’ Squadron. Massacred ter a man, they were. Their horses, rations, ammunition, and kit were looted, and then Fort Cardus was

## *" Bumph "*

set on fire and burned ter the ground. A real knock-out. Terrible business."

"First round to Messrs. the Enemy," I remarked, as Uncle James paused.

## VII

"First round ter the enemy, as yer say," confirmed Uncle James; "but I'm glad ter say it was about the only bit of success they did have. There was exactly one survivor from Fort Cardus: not a soldier, but a weedy little Multani water-carrier named Habib Shah—or Habiba, as the sowars used ter call him. Fer some reason or other, Habiba was outside the fort when the Pathans attacked, and when he saw how things were going he very sensibly took ter his heels and hooked it down the valley as fast as he could shift. He did the twenty-odd miles down ter Fort Victoria in not much over the three hours, as far as I could make out; anyhow, he fetched up there just as Colam, me second-in-command, and Hartigan, of Sam Browne's, were finishing their breakfast. Thanks ter Habiba's warning, they were not only able ter take all precautions fer their own safety, but also ter send off a couple of men up the Badraga ter tell me the news. I was pretty well hipped, I don't mind telling yer, when I heard about poor Fitzhugh's squadron; but it was no good crying over spilt milk, and

## *Lean Brown Men*

the important thing now was ter see that Clare and Victoria didn't suffer the same fate.

"Of course, I didn't know what the enemy's next move would be, but I figured out what I'd do in their place, and came ter the conclusion that they'd march on down the Zogha and try ter take Victoria. If they succeeded, that'd mean they were between me and India, and even if they couldn't turn me out of Fort Clare they could make it pretty hard fer any reinforcements ter reach me. On the other hand, if Fort Victoria held out all might be well, because, with the mouth of the Badraga Valley in our hands, the reinforcements ought ter be able ter fight their way through all right. Anyhow, the fate of Fort Cardus showed me that the Pathans hadn't divided their forces, as I'd hoped they would; and I began ter wish, if Victoria was ter take the next knock, that I'd stayed down there and sent Colam up ter Clare. However, it was too late ter start wishing. All I could do now was ter sit tight and count the days till a relieving force could arrive, and pray that Colam and Hartigan would have better luck than young Fitzhugh.

"Well, if ycr've read yer history-books yer don't need ter be told much about the next three weeks, Marcus. Sure enough, the whole eight thousand of the enemy moved down the Zogha and laid siege ter Fort Victoria. They tried the same rush tactics at first as they'd

“ *Bumph* ”

used so successfully at Fort Cardus, was ready for them, and after costly attempts with the battering-ram withdrew to a safe distance and sat down round the fort. The next day they remembered my existence, and sent off a force of about five hundred to keep me busy at Fort Clare and prevent me—I suppose—from trying ter break out and come ter Victoria’s assistance. Then, with my two squadrons safely locked into the Badraga, they set out ter take Victoria by hook or by crook.

“ They tried everything, but Colam and Hartigan beat ’em every time. The Pathans shot at anyone who dared show his nose above the battlements. They made no less than seventeen attempts at scaling the walls, using up ter two hundred ladders at a time, and fighting like demons in spite of the appalling punishment our fellers inflicted on them. They made several unsuccessful efforts ter burn the place down. They cut off the water-supply. And finally, after about a fortnight of this, they got the hump. Leaving a small force at Victoria ter maintain the state of siege, the bulk of ’em came pouring up the Badraga ter have a cut at Fort Clare, by way of change.

“ So fer the next ten days or so it was *our* turn. Gad, it was hell, Marcus, me boy ! We were none too fresh ter begin with, fer the small ‘ containing force ’ that had been watching us fer the past fortnight had already cut off our



## *Lean Brown Men*

water and given us a lot of *dik*<sup>1</sup> one way and another. Worse still, we'd had ter waste a lot of valuable ammunition on them, without doing much damage, and when I saw the main body arriving—thousands and thousands of the devils—I figured that it wasn't far off the end. Fer one thing, I thought their arrival meant that Fort Victoria had fallen, and yec can imagine the moral effect of that, not only on me personally, but on me men too. If we'd known that our fellers down below were still holding out, it'd have given us heart ter keep up the struggle more gamcly, but the thought that three out of our five squadrons, and two of our three forts, were no more, wasn't exactly calculated ter cheer us up. However, we kept on, not so much through courage as through sheer damned obstinacy. The men were wonderful, and though the casualty-list got bigger every clay and our supplies grew less, I think we were all determined ter hang on ter the bitter end. . . . Give me another peg, will yec? Me throat's as dry as a dust-bin."

Regardless of the hour and of every other consideration, I hastened to supply his need. There could obviously be no going to bed now till the story was done, and Uncle James, though a trifle husky, was otherwise as fresh as a daisy. I mixed him a long but well-flavoured peg, and helped myself to a slightly weaker one.

"The end came on the evening of Thursday,

<sup>1</sup> Trouble.

*“ Bumph ”*

August 22nd,” my great-uncle resumed, having refreshed himself. “ I’ve no great head fer dates, generally speaking, but I always remember that one. Whether or not the Pathans got wind that reinforcements were at hand, I can’t tell yer ; but I’ve always thought they must have, because fer thirty-six hours beforehand they gave us, literally, not ten minutes’ rest. Day and night they came at us, attacking in relays, as they could afford ter do. Wave after wave of the devils hurled themselves at us, and while one party was trying ter escalate us another would be giving them covering fire, which made it pretty hard fer us ter beat them off.

“ We, on the other hand, were so reduced in numbers by this time that we couldn’t afford any reliefs, and it wouldn’t be far wide of the mark ter say that not a man of us left the battlements fer two days and a night, unless he was a casualty. I’ve been in some hot scraps since then, but never anything ter touch those last hours of the assault on Fort Clare. We were so worn-out that we seemed ter have parted company with all our normal senses. Fer instance, speaking fer myself, I simply lost count of the passage of time, and if I swallowed any food I must have done it quite unconsciously. Some time or other I managed ter collect a couple of wounds—a chip off me right ear, and a slug through me left shoulder—but, believe me or not, ter this day I can’t remember being hit. When the siege started, there were

## *Lean Brown Men*

two hundred and eighty-one men in Fort Clare, Marcus. When it was over, there were exactly three unwounded. That'll tell yer. Ninety-two of us were killed, including both me subalterns, and nearly twenty more died of their wounds within the next day or two.

*"But we held Fort Clare!"*

"It was about five o'clock on the afternoon of the 22nd when me sole surviving native officer staggered up ter me and reported that there was fresh rifle-fire coming from somewhere down the valley. There was such a din going on round the fort that I didn't believe him at first, especially as I'd figured that reinforcements couldn't possibly reach us till the 26th or 27th at the earliest. But a moment later the matter was settled beyond all doubt by the sound of a trumpet-call in the distance—very faint it was, more like an echo than the real thing.

"Now, on the south-east corner of Fort Clare, as yer may remember, there's a small watch-tower standing eight or ten feet above the level of the battlements, so I ran up there and took a glanee down the valley. I had a telescope, but I couldn't see much. The whole of the foreground and middle distance seemed ter be full of Pathans, but that had been a common enough sight fer the past ten days. There was a lot of smoke and mist about, too, and I couldn't get anything like a clear view. But then, even as I watched, I saw the tribesmen beginning to take notice, and those who were farthest from

“ *Bumph* ”

the fort seemed ter be scattering right and left. And then I heard a lot of firing going on down the valley. . . . But at that moment there was a terrible tumult from the other side of the fort—the shouting of war-cries and a deafening fusillade. I looked round, and realized that a last attack was being hurled against us. Hundreds of men with ladders were rushing forward, so I leaped down from the tower and rallied my poor chaps fer a final effort.

“How long we fought, I don’t know. It seemed like an eternity, and the fighting was more desperate than we’d ever had before. Actually, I don’t believe the assault lasted for more than twenty minutes or half an hour—it can’t have done—but when every moment looks as if it’s going ter be yer last, yer can’t be expected ter keep Greenwich Mean Time. We were so weak that fer the first time since the siege started about a dozen Pathans managed ter get right inside the fort; and, while we were trying ter scotch them, others were swarming up the ladders all round us. I remember shooting two of the invaders, and then glancing round and seeing another swarthy ruffian cocking his leg over the north wall, so I had at him and got him with me sword. He toppled off the wall, and I looked down ter see if there were any more coming that way. . . . There weren’t. . . . The valley was full of Pathans, but—bless me soul!—they were all skedaddling fer the hills as fast as their legs

## *Lean Brown Men*

would carry them! . . . I rushed over ter the east wall: and what did I see but two squadrons of the Doaba Lancers—I knew them by their green *safas*—charging in line against our demoralized besiegers, while behind them the other two squadrons were galloping round to outflank the fugitives who were trying ter get away ter the hills. . . .

“Five minutes later I was shaking hands with old Bob Bray, the Commandant of the Doabas.”

## VIII

“So you were right, Uncle James, about owing your life to the Doabas, but wrong about being specially beholden to John Daubeny,” I observed, as my great-uncle’s beak disappeared once more into his tumbler. “What happened to him? Was he with the regiment, or hadn’t he rejoined in time to come with them?”

“Give me another peg, and I’ll tell yer,” bargained Uncle James thirstily. “Oh yes, he’d rejoined in time; but when I looked round fer him, after all the squadrons had re-assembled at Fort Clare, I couldn’t see him anywhere. There were only four British officers to be seen—Bob Bray, the colonel; a major named O’Shaughnessy; and two subalterns, whose names I forget. Presently, when things had settled down a bit, I made inquiries.

“ *Bumph* ”

“ ‘ Where’s John Daubeney, Colonel ? ’ I asked Bob Bray. ‘ I understood he was rejoining you from staff employment in time ter come on this relief.’ ”

“ The Colonel, who had been brimming over with good spirits—both literally and metaphorically, for we’d lowered the best part of a bottle of brandy in celebration—suddenly looked as black as thunder, and so did the three other fellers. Old Bray gulped before he answered me.

“ ‘ Friend of yours, Darell ? ’ he asked, very stiff.

“ ‘ Well, I wouldn’t say that, exactly,’ said I, ‘ but I knew him pretty well in Multan.’ ”

“ ‘ Oh, yer did, did yer ? ’ growled Bob. ‘ Well, then, yer may be interested ter know that Captain Daubeney is under close arrest at Fort Victoria ! ’ ”

“ ‘ What ! ’ I exclaimed. ‘ And what the devil for, may I ask ? ’ ”

“ Poor old Bob Bray went dark purple, and I believe there were tears in his eyes—tears of rage and shame. The major got up and walked away, and the two cornets did likewise.

“ ‘ Cowardice in the face of the enemy, and refusing ter obey a lawful command ! ’ Bob Bray barked out at me, trembling like a leaf. ‘ Yer heard what I said, Darell ? Cowardice ! *Cowardice !* A squadron-commander of the Doabas under arrest fer cowardice in the face of the enemy ! God help me, if it isn’t more than I can bear ! ’ ”

## *Lean Brown Men*

“ Well, I tell yer, I was thunderstruck, Marcus. Couldn’t believe me ears at first, and thought this must be a dream brought on by all I’d been through. But there it was. There was Bob Bray, colonel of Daubeney’s own regiment, shouting it at me time and again, sort of defiantly, as a man will when he’s afire with shame. I didn’t dare press him fer details then and there ; I think he’d have pistoled me if I had. I muttered something or other about being sorry ter hear it, and then changed the subject as quick as I could. There was a lot ter be done, as yer can imagine—all the dead and wounded ter be attended to, and precautions taken against any further attacks. And then at last I turned in, and slept fer thirteen hours without a stir.

“ When I woke up, I found out a bit more about what had been happening. It appeared that the General had been able ter send me the whole of the ’Pindi brigade after all, the threatened trouble having been averted on the other parts of the Border. The brigade, consisting of the Doabas and two other regiments, had reached Fort Victoria by forced marches early on the 21st, and had spent that day mopping up the Pathan containing force left there ter keep Colam and Hartigan quiet. The Pathans, cut off from their pals in the Badraga, had retreated up the Zogha towards the ruins of Fort Cardus, so one regiment was detailed ter follow them up, and also ter see about some

“ *Bumph* ”

kind of funeral arrangements for poor young Fitzhugh and ‘C’ Squadron. Another regiment, with brigade headquarters, remained at Victoria, while the Doabas had been despatched ter relieve me at Fort Clare.

“ By degrees I managed ter find out about John Daubeney. There isn’t much ter tell yer. He *was* a picture-book soldier, after all, and the poor feller had a yellor streak in him somewhere, which came out at the wrong moment. Yer’ve read the court-martial proceedings, and the details aren’t at all important. All it amounts to is that Daubeney was commanding the advance-guard squadron when the Doabas set off up the Badraga, and a mile or two up the valley he bumped a *lashkar* detached from the force that was besieging me. The squadron got inter a bit of an ambush, and things looked bad fer the moment. Daubeney lost his nerve and bolted back ter the main body, leaving his sowars ter fight it out by themselves. He pretended, of course, that he’d merely ridden back ter warn the Colonel—as if any British officer would think of leaving his men on such an errand!—but his funk showed, and Bob Bray saw it. He ordered Daubeney back ter his squadron at once, but the poor chap was in such a state of nerves that he broke down—in front of the men, too; *that* was the dreadful part of it—and refused ter go. Bob Bray put him straight inter arrest, and sent him back ter Fort Victoria with another captain as escort.



## *Lean Brown Men*

Then the Doabas moved on, ter find that Daubeney's squadron had already cleared the valley on their own account. And in due course they won through ter me at Fort Clare."

"According to the court-martial papers, Daubeney was cashicred," I said, as Uncle James fell into a reverie.

He nodded. "Thanks ter me, chiefly, Marcus. Yer see, military law in those days wasn't quite as it is now, and his court-martial took place at Fort Victoria three days later. I was a member of the Court, though I fought hard enough ter get out of it. The moment I was detailed—which was as soon as I reached Victoria—I went straight ter the Brigadier and told him, in so many words, that I had a private *zid*<sup>1</sup> against Daubeney, and that I was therefore obviously debarred from sitting in judgment on him. But the Brigadier—old 'Croaker' Harris it was, a pestilential old rullian—wouldn't let me out unless I gave him full particulars, which, of course, I had ter refuse ter do, fer Clare's sake. The difficulty was, d'yer see, ter get seven officers ter form the Court who weren't actual witnesses of Daubeney's offence, and 'Croaker' wouldn't hear of postponing the trial till we got back ter India. So in the end I had ter sit on the Court. Damned unpleasant business. . . .

"As yer know, the penalty fer cowardice on

<sup>1</sup> Grudge.

active service is ‘ death, or such less punishment as is in this Act mentioned.’ Daubeny pleaded not guilty, and put up a desperate fight, but he hadn’t a leg ter stand on, and the whole business only took a couple of hours. We found him guilty, and the first vote on the sentence found everyone except me in favour of the death penalty. Strictly speaking, of course, that should have settled the matter, because a majority vote was quite sufficient ; and, mark yer, if it’d been anyone else but John Daubeny before the Court I’d have voted fer death like the rest of ’em. The evidence was damning, and that was the right penalty. But yer see how I was placed, don’t yer ? ”

“ He was Clare’s husband,” I murmured, “ and you were proposing to usurp his position as such at the first opportunity.”

“ Just so. And although I knew well enough that Clare would have been glad ter be shot of him in any other way, and ter marry me instead, I could not possibly, as a man of honour, take advantage of this chance ter clear him right off the earth. Clare loved me ; but how could I go to her and tell her I’d helped ter sentence her husband ter death, and that now we were free ter marry ? Mean ter say. . . . Well, yer understand. Mark yer, I won’t say I wasn’t tempted. It seemed such an easy way out, and yet it wasn’t. I knew that if John Daubeny died by our sentence, Clare would never be my wife. And I wanted her, Marcus : Gad, how I

## *Lean Brown Men*

wanted her ! . . . So I set meself out ter get him off."

" Phew ! " I whistled softly to myself.

" As I told yer, the voting was six ter one against me at the start. I don't know what I said, but the next vote was only four ter three. Half an hour later, after arguing like a Bengali pleader, I had all but the President on my side ; and nothing I could say would shift *him*. Pestilential feller, he was. Obstinate as a Chinese mule. But it didn't matter, fer I'd got a good majority verdict. The other six of us voted fer cashiering, and the President had ter accept our decision, though I believe he went ter his grave swearing it had been a miscarriage of justice.

" So that was the end of that business. About a week later I led the battered remains of Darell's Horse back ter India in company with brigade headquarters and one of the regiments that had helped ter relieve us. The other two stayed on in my three forts—they rebuilt Fort Cardus, of course—and there was no more trouble with the Mirza Khel or Tikhannis fer some time ter come.

" Daubeny came back ter India with us, still under arrest, fer his sentence had ter be confirmed by the Commander-in-Chief. I didn't get a chance of speaking to him, and I don't know that I'd have taken it if I had. He never knew that he owed his life ter me, and it wasn't my place ter tell him.

" Funny thing, how the tables were turned,

*“ Bumph ”*

though, wasn't it? A few weeks before I'd been dreading that I'd owe me life ter him, and now he owed his ter me.”

Uncle James put his monocle into his eye and peered at the marble clock on the mantelpiece. The tapering gilt hands showed twenty minutes past two.

“ Time ter be getting ter bed,” he remarked, as casually as if it were only eleven o'clock. “ Smith, me real butler, would go up in blue smoke if he knew I'd sat here till this hour, drinking whisky on top of port.” He chuckled hoarsely, and glanced speculatively from me to his empty glass. “ Decanter's nearly dead, Marcus, me boy. What d'yer say ter finishing it off, ter make a tidy job of it? ”

I regarded the old sinner with as much severity as I could summon.

“ You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Uncle James ! ” I admonished him. “ You've drunk enough to float a barge already, and the fact that you haven't turned a hair in doing so is merely additional proof of your dissolute habits. At the same time, your conduct in proposing to go to bed just when you've reached the climax of your story shows, I suppose, that you haven't quite lost your flair for tactics in your old age ; or do I mean strategy ? ”

Uncle James guffawed loudly. “ Strategy's nearer the mark,” he confessed, “ and I'm glad ter see yer can reckernize when y're out-

## *Lean Brown Men*

manœuvred ! . . . That's a good feller ! . . . Take a decent peg yerself, and pass me the remainder. . . . Not too much soda. . . . Whoa, dammit ! . . . Now, then, what else do yer want ter know ? ”

“ Why, about Clare, of course ! ” I protested “ What happened when Daubenys's sentence was promulgated ? ”

“ I believe they went ter Australia and took up sheep-farming,” said Uncle James. “ Once we'd got back ter India and civilization I never clapped eyes on John Daubenys again, nor on Clare either. But I did hear, some years later, that they were doing quite well and had a couple of kids——”

“ What ! You mean that she stuck to him ? ” I broke in. “ That, after all that scheming between you, she didn't throw him over for you, after all ? ”

“ That's just what I do mean, Marcus,” my great-uncle replied. “ Women are mighty queer cattle, me boy—take it from me. Don't yer have more ter do with them than yer can help, fer yer can never tell what the devil they'll do next. Listen ter me, now ! I'm as sure as that I'm sitting here that, until the moment when Clare Daubenys got news of her husband's disgrace, she didn't care a row of tin-headed pins fer him. She'd been forced inter marrying him by a trick. He hadn't treated her well. He'd shamed her by having affairs with other women within a few months of their marriage. And,

*“ Bumph ”*

as I've told yer, she was mighty sweet on *me*. If he'd been killed on service or died of disease, she'd have come ter the altar with me as soon as she decently could. Even if he'd survived, she'd have been ready ter leave him and face the world with me. Knowing her as I did, I'd have said that there were no circumstances under which she'd have stuck ter him, given the slightest chance of escape. . . . But, yer see, in thinking that, I'd left out of consideration just the one set of circumstances that might make her change her mind. So long as he was alive and well and prosperous, Clare had no use fer her husband. But the moment she knew he was in trouble—serious trouble—that curious sort of impulse that a woman calls her 'duty' began ter sit up and assert itself, and nothing I could do would ever make it lie down again. John Daubeney's disgrace was the trumpet-call that roused Clare's sense of 'duty,' so ter speak. There must have been some good in the feller after all, I suppose. Anyhow, that's how she put it in the only letter I ever had from her afterwards, and I just had ter take her word fer it."

"Well, I'm dashed!" was the only remark that suggested itself to me.

"And so was I, fer a time," retorted Uncle James, levering himself out of his chair, "but yer get over everything, if yer wait long enough. Queer cattle, women. Take me tip and leave 'em alone as much as yer can, Marcus—that is, if they're already married."

## *Lean Brown Men*

He drained his glass, threw away the butt of his last cheroot, armed himself with a book and his reading-glasses, and set out slowly for the staircase, followed by myself. There was still just a trace of an old-time cavalry swagger discernible in his walk.

At the top of the stairs he turned and shook hands with me.

“ ‘And so ter bed—slightly tanked!’ ” he quoted, with a smile. “ Good-night t’ yer, Marcus, me boy! ”

## IX

Five years—nearly six—have rolled by since my great-uncle told me that story. Time has brought some changes in its train; though, to be candid, I am more often struck with the strange immutability of other things.

For example, my Uncle James—Darell of Darellpur to the world—still lives on in that old grey house under Crowborough Beacon. This year he will celebrate his ninety-sixth birthday, and Smith, his butler, reports to me that there is every reason to hope for a spirited and unlaboured century. Later this year I expect to see Uncle James again, for my name stands once more at the head of the regimental furlough-roster.

Meanwhile, here in India also, I am struck by that queer blend of the changing and

*“ Bumph ”*

the changeless of which Life seems to be compounded.

Six months ago I succeeded to the command of the Regiment, just as we were on the point of leaving Meerut for the Frontier. Such comparatively unimportant matters as changes in a regimental command normally excite little enough public interest, but I suppose it was only to be expected that smart-alick journalists should call attention to the fact that, for the second time in its history, Darell's Horse has a Darell to command it. But the comment on this "coincidence" was as nothing compared with the gurgles of journalistic bliss which arose when it was announced from Simla that, on completion of the normal cold-weather reliefs, Darell's Horse, commanded by Lieut.-Colonel Marcus Darell, would be stationed for the next three years at Darellpur, N.W.F.P.

We arrived here a month later, and took up our quarters in the old cavalry barracks near the fort—they will persist in calling it Fort Darell, but I can only think of it as Fort Victoria. Stretching east and south from here lies the cantonment, with accommodation for two infantry brigades, a brigade of field artillery, a mountain battery, a divisional signal unit, an armoured-car company, and a squadron of the Royal Air Force, with ancillary services in due proportion. Their lines cluster round District Headquarters and Flagstaff House, which latter is tenanted by a real live major-general. The



## *Lean Brown Men*

troops' recreation-grounds and the Club polo-ground are green and spacious, the envy of neighbouring cantonments.

Northward from the eastern corner of the military station run Civil Lines, where dwell in majesty a Commissioner, a Sessions Judge, and minor luminaries innumerable. East of this again lies the native town, a prosperous trading-centre with a population of nearly forty thousand souls. In the cantonments alone we have two luxurious cinemas, while the native quarter boasts at least half a dozen. Our bungalows and messes are lit and cooled by electricity. The water-works, a mile and a half to the north, delivers clear running water to our bathrooms and kitchens through chromium-plated taps.

Our railway-station is turreted and loopholed in the traditional Frontier style, but its waiting-rooms, refreshment-rooms, and book-stalls are models of what such institutions should be, especially considering that in these days of motor transport most people approach and leave Darellpur by the broad six-abreast road which runs straight through to Rawalpindi (with a decent car you can do the trip in less than nine hours). To the west again, a fine metalled road emerges from the Mall and leads the way towards the brown, jagged hills. A couple of miles ahead it bifurcates, one branch inviting the traveller to make the fifty-minute journey to Fort Cardus in the Zogha Valley,

*“ Bumph ”*

the other suggesting a short run to Fort Clare in the Badraga.

I should mention, too, that at this road junction, on a high plinth of local stone, there stands a formidable image of Uncle James, mounted on a monstrous war-horse. He is all sword and moustaches and defiance, and he faces the hills, rallying the ghosts of his former troopers against all comers. . . . If you halt your car at that spot and wait till a party of dusty, hawk-eyed Mirza Khel Pathans pass by on their lawful or unlawful occasions, you will be surprised or amused—according to your age and temperament—to observe that with one accord they raise their lean, brown hands and salute the statue. This they do quite of their own accord. They would do it even if you were not watching them, for there is no order that they should make obeisance. If you waited long enough, you might have the fortune to see a squadron of Darell's Horse ride past on its way to or from one of the forts beyond—we still keep a small garrison in each, lest the Mirza Khel should be tempted to attack their neighbours, the Tikhannis, or vice versa. They don't do it so often nowadays as they used to, but one can never tell. On the whole, life in these parts is very quiet and peaceful.

Only last week I motored up to Fort Clare to see how “ C ” Squadron was behaving itself, and, the day being bright and cool, I packed my wife and my small son into the back of the

## *Lean Brown Men*

car, just to give them an airing. I found the squadron at stables, but stayed long enough to watch the beginning of the inter-troop polo competition on the large recreation-ground west of the fort. Harvey and Mulligan, the squadron officers, entertained us to lunch, and did us very well indeed. They seemed to be enjoying their spell of garrison duty, though Mulligan implored me to send up a mechanic to see to their wireless set, which was always going wrong. He was most annoyed at having missed a running commentary on the England *v.* Ireland Rugger International which had been broadcast on the Empire wave-length the previous evening.

They were just seeing us into the car when young James, my first-born, who had been unusually silent and meditative up to that moment, broke out with one of his characteristic conundrums. He addressed it to Harvey, whom he obviously regarded as the sole proprietor of the little fort.

"Why," demanded Master James imperiously, "is your house called Fort Clare, Uncle Harvey?"

Harvey scratched his head and made a grimace. "Blest if I know, young man!" he admitted, with a laugh. "I'd never thought about it. Try your Uncle Mulligan. He knows everything!"

"Except the answer to that one," Mulligan acknowledged ruefully. "What rum questions you do ask, James! Sorry, and all that. Sup-

“ *Bumph* ”

pose you ask your mother. Thanks to you, she has to be a walking encyclopædia.”

“ I do—but I’m afraid I’m beaten this time,” confessed Barbara, with a smile. “ It’s just a name, I suppose ; rather a pretty one, I think. It had to be called something, you see. How *do* forts get their names, I wonder?—Can you tell us, Marcus ? ”

I pressed the self-starter and waved them into the car.

“ As it happens, I can,” I said, “ but it’s too long a story to tell you now. One of these days, perhaps, I’ll write it down, and then you’ll all know as much about it as I do.—Bye-bye, chaps ! I’ll send that mechanic up to-morrow without fail. . . . ”

And with that, I let in the clutch, and we started back to Darellpur.



SOME PRESS APPRECIATIONS OF

# HILL QUEST

By MICHAEL BURT

"This is a story written with fire and keen humour—the humour is really superb—and it is also a romance of a very high sort indeed. The book has everything to recommend it, for it is at once interesting, exciting, humorous, romantic and—well written."—*The Evening News*.

"This really delightful novel gives one the impression of being written by someone who is a master of an unusual subject and has known how to make a book about it without including a single paragraph which deserves to be skipped."—LILIAN ARNOLD in *John o' London's Weekly*.

"Mr. Burt has written a tale in the Buchan manner. His descriptions transport you to the very heart of the scene."—HOWARD SPRING in *The Evening Standard*.

"HILL QUEST definitely places Michael Burt in the front rank of novelists. A really fine book, full of interest from cover to cover."—*Midland Chronicle*.

"An unusually good adventure book."—*Times of India*.

"Michael Burt's first novel gives promise of greater things, and we believe that in him has been found an author capable of joining the ranks of those few who can write a colourful and exciting story with an Indian background that is true to life, and not marred by those descriptions which so often raise a shudder in any reader who knows this country."—*Civil and Military Gazette, Lahore*.

"A wholly delightful ease in writing, a buoyant sense of humour, and an eye for romance are the desirable qualities with which Mr. Burt has set out. The atmosphere of the book is always convincing."—*Brisbane Telegraph*.

"Captain Burt writes from his heart. Humour softens his knowledge and he can tell an excellent story."—FRANCIS BURDETT in *The Catholic Herald*.

"I like Captain Burt's straightforward style and the masterly way he tells his story. Both men and women readers will thoroughly enjoy this excellent story. Besides its originality of setting it has a sense of reality and romantic appeal that is entirely fascinating."—*National Newsagent*.

WARD, LOCK & CO: LTD., London and Melbourne

# SOME PRESS APPRECIATIONS OF THE ROAD TO ROUNDAABOUT

By MICHAEL BURT

"This is one of those rare books, a quietly told and yet exciting story. The characterisation is good throughout, and the background soundly painted."  
—*Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*.

"An admirable adventure story about an unconventional hero, who fights his difficulties with quiet courage and wins the reader's interest as well as his affection."—*News Chronicle*.

"A fine and exciting novel of a superior kind. Not only does it give you a captivating story, but it also lets the reader in on many mysterious causes of the unrest in India. A book of exceptional interest and usefulness."—*Irish Independent*.

"A novel which can so 'get you' that you forget all about crumpets and flapjacks at fireside tea on a wet Sunday must be worth reading. An invigorating romance, brimful of action, and without a single dull moment."—*Worthing Herald*.

## SECRET ORCHARDS

By MICHAEL BURT

"Captain Burt's style is pleasant and agreeably seasoned with quotations from Francis Thompson; his dialogue is sometimes a little arch, but his knowledge of India and avoidance of *cliches* and stock situations make this an unusually convincing adventure story."—*Country Life*.

"Captain Burt has already made a name for himself with *HILL QUEST* and *THE ROAD TO ROUNDAABOUT*. His style is smooth and leisurely."—*Daily Telegraph*.

"Stories with an Indian setting frequently suffer from a certain 'sameness,' and it is a pleasure to record that *SECRET ORCHARDS* is refreshingly different. Captain Burt's style is vigorous, and fortunately he introduces a light touch, and this is much appreciated in a novel which bristles with secret service agents and thrills. The author knows his India, and his background is described convincingly."—*India*.

"Told in the author's customary crisp style. The narrative is admirably worked out, with many humorous touches."—*Liverpool Post*.

"A muscular plot in a uniform of natty humour. 'This novel is full of soldierly life drawn with the assurance of familiarity.'"—*News Chronicle*.

"A delightful mixture of mystery, adventure and romance, and the various picturesque backgrounds are touched in with admirable delicacy."  
—*Nottingham Guardian*.

WARD, LOCK & CO. LTD., London and Melbourne

